

Maritime cosmology and archaeology

Westerdahl, Christer

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QUELLENKUNDE

► CHRISTER WESTERDAHL

Maritime Cosmology and Archaeology

Cognition and the Cognitive

In recent years archaeologists have begun to refer to cognitive aspects in their discipline. What is meant here by cognitive is the way people in the past have thought about themselves in relation to their environment and how they have represented this relationship, or, generally, their cognition. Cognition is a function of all the senses: hearing, seeing, even smelling. The cognitive landscape is the landscape experienced by the senses as well as the remembered landscape which one carries along with oneself. To some extent, it may be subliminal or subconscious. It is true that the source material of archaeology is of a material nature, but basically the ambition of all research of the humanities is presumably to get as close as possible to the thoughts of people of the past. An internationally well-known pioneer of archaeological theory (himself formerly obsessed with objects, and very successfully so), the Swede Mats Malmer often – and sometimes quite provocatively – talked about the need for archaeology to follow up the notion of making the *spiritual* life of ancient times the foremost and even the only task of archaeology. It is of course a dangerous illusion to believe that prehistoric man in any period thought exactly as we do. To believe so would be to ignore all experience of how men have been shaped by their environment, by their adaptation to this environment and to other people. This goes for individuals as well as for the social “thinking” of groups. But to be able to interpret the cognitive significance of artefacts or other remains of the past, we find that a wide spectrum of knowledge must be gathered from archaeology and all other disciplines concerned with the cognitive world of human beings. For example, archaeology is not in itself particularly well suited for taking up the challenges inherent to rock art. The contribution of this discipline is restricted primarily to the dating of the objects depicted or of the remains found in connection with the rock panels.

Even the sub-discipline maritime archaeology has now begun to be influenced by this ambition. As for myself, I have always maintained that the task of maritime archaeology is to *document and analyse maritime cultures of the past*. Maritime culture can be defined as the cultural manifestations shaped and exercised by groups living by the sea and getting their subsistence from the sea. And, it could be added, by and from great open waters in general. It is unlikely that the difference between the sea and the great lakes would be obvious in a cognitive sense anyway. Yet this ambition causes a slight problem of interpretation, since some people probably lived their lives in the neighbourhood of these waters without themselves being dependent on

them in any way. It is thus possible to live with your back to the sea, facing the land. On the other hand, the opposite would be the rule almost everywhere. In any case, the sea would be one of the basic points of reference.¹

In this text, it will make no difference if the archaeological source material is found underwater or on land. Almost all remains are part of the maritime cultural landscape of the respective period. The relevance of all sources will be judged according to their ability to reveal cognitive aspects of human existence. Some major problems of interpretation in Nordic archaeology will be addressed, and a few comparisons with other areas will be undertaken. This text is an attempt to introduce something truly new. It is thus necessarily associated with the analysis of unconventional kinds of sources, which archaeologists may never have even touched in the past. A cross-disciplinary approach is required.

Cosmology

In order to formulate my hypothesis, I must refer briefly to definition. I must confess, however, that I have not found any good references to this part. In my view, the kind of cosmology I am referring to is a simpler kind of explanation of the world than myth and religion. It is based on contrasts and other great dividing lines in existence. This is why it can – as assumed here – pass unscathed through time and space, almost independently of time-bound ornamentation. Among its manifestations are the various doctrines of basic elements in the universe or the primeval or first element, which found its first expression in partial dissociation from religion, in the work of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers (fire, water etc).² However, this idea is linked to more than two elements, usually to four.

Cosmology could be said to represent the *magico-religious aspect of cognition*. It is an emotional and partly subconscious aspect. It is quite plausible that no basic cosmology was formulated as such, even in the past. Its position is that of an illiterate "ideology" expressed by oral tradition, language and the application of all the senses. In an illiterate tradition, images such as rock carvings are a prime form of illustration/conveyance. Cosmology is often covered by and hidden beneath more sophisticated religious representations. Religions proper have a much clearer social function and change relatively quickly *pari passu* societal development. Their role is formulated by the upper classes and elites of society as a means of explaining and legitimizing their own existence *vis-à-vis* the subordinate groups, the "lower classes." In fact cosmology often works as a *counter-ideology* to formal religion, used by the subordinate groups. This cosmology, and the kind of magic used by the underdogs to negotiate it, is accordingly despised by the creators of such religious systems. In their eyes it is merely *superstition*. I think that it is quite possible to sketch a picture of a cosmology, or part of it, for a long period of time. On the other hand, I will maintain that prehistoric religions represent a much greater challenge. They are much more sophisticated, thus more difficult and ambiguous. In a certain sense they are the offspring of literacy, partial or "total." In this text I will attempt only to indicate a few of the interfaces of cosmology, magic and religion. It will be observed that I have avoided references to the important scientific field known as structuralism.³ This avoidance does not mean that I consider structuralism irrelevant or inadequate. It means simply that I want to found my somewhat alternative view on independent source material, which has not been used previously for this purpose, rather than on a theoretical scheme. Methodically, I will proceed by way of *cross-disciplinary analogies*. The dual structure of the cosmology proposed may allude to many different things at the same time, such as nature versus culture, female versus male, etc., all elements which are part of structural patterns. But I have chosen one of these pairs of opposites as a fundamental factor – the environmental one: sea versus land.

What I am going to present as a model for the explanation of maritime cosmology has taken many years to chisel out of an old torso composed of several elements of maritime and other cultures.⁴ It was only in 2004 that I found what I now audaciously propose as a definitive solution. At least when it comes to cosmology proper, I myself am convinced that I am on the right track. My task is now rather to convince others. My own scepticism with regard to my success in this endeavour derives chiefly from doubts of my own ability to explain to my readers the sheer scope of human forms of expression and their relevance to cosmology. After all, I did not understand it myself for many years, although I was more or less entirely immersed in the topics involved. This exploration will touch on such disparate phenomena as words, names, pictures, objects, and animals or human beings as transferred forms or “symbols.” Inanimate materials, such as stone and water, and their transformation by way of fire may also be relevant to some extent. The senses, such as sight and hearing, perhaps even smelling and feeling, could be implicated. Initially, I had no idea that this spectrum could possibly explain other controversial and enigmatic elements than the manifestations of a “purely” maritime culture. Well, here it is:

Taboo and noa

Two essential anthropological concepts taken from recent cultures in the South Pacific are *taboo* and *noa*. *Taboo* is what is forbidden. *Noa* is what is normal and what could replace that which is *taboo*, if needed.⁵ *Noa* could also be a construction for the purpose, a paraphrase or a euphemism. In this case, *taboo* at sea is what represents land. *Noa* replaces it as not forbidden at sea.

In our world, the complex of ideas I am referring to here is known simply as *superstition*, *Aberglaube*, a term which is itself already a clear value judgment. It has little or no connection to the sublime categories of religion. One of the reasons why no scholars before me have ever tried to use it as an analogy to archaeological problems may be precisely their explicitly and implicitly condescending attitude towards everyday magic (cf. above).

It is well-known that fishermen have or rather had a well-developed kind of superstition. Today it is believed that only old fishermen would believe in such “nonsense.” Probably most of us also believe that superstition does not exist anymore. This is almost true, but only almost. And it does not only concern *old* fishermen. In fact, likewise contrary to common expectations, it also does not only concern males. We, and some fishermen then, may encounter this superstition as the notion that various things and behaviour bring fortune at sea and other things rather the reverse. Mostly the rules are negative. Many of them would seem to relate to gender. The best-known *taboo* forbids women on board, but it is by no means the most important of these rules. Black colours should always be avoided on boats. One should never whistle at sea. You should never have clawed animals such as cats, dogs, etc, on the vessel. On board you must not even mention them and others of their kind. The same goes particularly for horses and wild animals such as bears and some bird species. The parson or priest is even less welcome than women/females. You must not talk about or name women/females or priests on board. It is even considered bad luck to meet such individuals on the way to the boat, i.e. a priest, a female, a cat, etc. When aboard a vessel, it is forbidden to use the same word or name you normally use for these animals and people. If you have to mention them anyway, you must use a *noa* expression, a ‘good name,’ a euphemism, Norwegian: *godnemne*.⁶

You also have to use another – *noa* – place name for a conspicuous feature on land than you would when on land. Perhaps you would even know the obvious cases of *Jungfrun*, ‘The Virgin,’ or *Bonden*, ‘The Farmer,’ which are often the *noa* names for several important sighting points in the North, such as that of Kullen of Skåne, southern Sweden (below). Even the boat and its

implements are taboo, and the same goes for various species of fish and the weather. Perhaps the latter category is the last to survive.

It was also taboo to mention stone of the land on the boat. In eighteenth-century Finnish Österbotten, the Swedish *noa* name for stone was 'halman.'⁷

On the other hand, many of the most forbidden names and words have in fact been used quite often in place names, and women are not always unwelcome; in fact they appear as mistresses of the sea. Ship names are not seldom feminine, or inspired by the names of land animals, both wild and domestic. A ship's cat and a ship's dog are indispensable on vessels, etc. Why? We will return to this ostensible structural reversal later on.

When fully developed, this system amounted to what was supposed to serve as a special language to be used at sea, a *sjómali*, as it was known in the Faroes, or mainly as another vocabulary, called *hafwords* or *lucky words* in Shetland, *skrocknamn* in Gotland.⁸ The latter means 'names of superstition,' which reveals its origin in an external, condescending observer. But it was in fact not merely another vocabulary; even grammar or syntax could be influenced.⁹

These language rules may appear as a rather "simple" kind of superstition. Sceptics have always despised such primitive forms of superstition, even fishermen. And nowadays very few people follow such rules. If they do, it is in secrecy. There appears to be a taboo on mentioning such practises to strangers.¹⁰ Already in the 1960s, when interviewing fishermen at Lake Vänern, I encountered very little of it.¹¹ In the 1970s along the Norrland coast down to Norrtälje in Roslagen, the prevalence was the same.¹² But this "varnish" was quite superficial. People were ashamed of showing what they believed in openly to strangers. Another important mechanism at work in the concealment of such behaviour is the notion that the practise of magic loses its power to transform if it becomes known to outsiders and non-believers, in this case landlubbers in particular (for example myself!). In fact, many of the old ideas were still alive, including taboos, *noa* names and other superstitions. But only a very few were affected by these old cognitive patterns. On the other hand, this group consisted not only of older people, and – as mentioned above – not only of males. A necessary condition seemed, however, to be that the practisers were firmly rooted in a maritime environment; accordingly, the practises were encountered primarily in fishing families and communities. In these milieux, everyone has a father and/or grandfather who was a fisherman, at least part-time.

Furthermore, the current forms of superstition were shared with quite a number of sailors. "Det er tydeleg at fordomar hjå sjøfolk stort sett har vori dei same som hjå fiskarar" (It is obvious that prejudice among sailors have been the same as those of fishermen).¹³ This was clear as well from some of the other interviews I carried out myself, the rituals being part of everyday maritime culture. The transfer is due to the pattern of recruitment within maritime culture. The life cycle of an individual fisherman/ farmer often includes a period at sea as a sailor and maybe as a pilot or pilot's assistant in later years. He accordingly bears the twin world of sea and land within himself.

The reader may by now have gained the impression that only the fishermen's world is affected. But that is an oversimplified notion. Only a closer examination could reveal the actual scope. At first *taboo* is associated with land, the *noa* name with the sea. There is a clear dividing line at the shore, and beyond it, by being on board the boat or the ship. The shore itself is an ambiguous zone where anything can happen. Everything associated with agrarian activities, the animals of the land, in particular the prestigious animals such as the horse and the great predators are taboo at sea. The physical stay at sea or on the boat demonstrates the application of the dividing line. It is applied with a clear theoretical consistency and in all current senses. The taboo could comprise seeing, gazing at, using, feeling and even smelling and hearing land phenomena. The pattern is in fact rather that of a *consistent system of belief*.

Studies of literature on the subject revealed that the same kind of taboos were known from

fishing cultures throughout the North Atlantic, even as far away as Newfoundland, but also in Texas, on the Malay peninsula and in parts of South America, e.g. Guyana.¹⁴ Thus it appears that it may be a universal form of superstition in fishing communities.

Several authors have explained this form as a reasonably logical reaction to the dangers and hazards of fishing as a *métier*, a profession. Magic would then give mental guarantees and assurances that could not be obtained anywhere else. Subjectively the fisherman felt much safer if he applied age-old traditions rather than not. No harm done anyway, if it did not work as he thought or in fact did not work at all! This idea was often put forward by people I interviewed who confessed to having made use of such magical practises.

To summarize: The opposition of sea and land is thus applicable two ways: 1) Any land words/names or patterns are fundamentally forbidden at sea (even if they belong to the sea), and 2) the most prominent incarnations of land – animals, etc. – represent the strongest taboos and are the most dangerous.

However, a third principle – in fact the strongest of them all – is that these taboos could be broken and the danger placated and used by way of magical transfers, which I will refer to below as *liminal agency*.

‘Only’ superstition and ‘only’ magic for the benefit of fishing?

Was this pattern still merely the product of superstition, merely the result of an adaptation to hazardous circumstances? Was it “just superstition?” At first the whole pattern seemed rather uninteresting to me. After all, my concerns during field work were very material and tangible, such as wreck sites, sea routes, harbours and all that pertained to these categories. The maritime cultural landscape¹⁵ was thus basically material. The field of archaeology chiefly studied such remains. The complex of beliefs and the associated behaviour more or less appeared as a kind of curiosity. Personally, I only started to doubt my former assumptions, shared by so many other field workers, by observing the obvious *consistency* of the pattern and especially the scope of its remains. I was deeply impressed by *the wealth of its traces in the landscape*. Especially, place names containing allusions to magic literally studded the archipelagos of Scandinavia: “Vi har her ei sikker rettesnor til å kartlegge dei gamle ferdslevegane langs kysten vår” (Here we have got a secure clue to chart the old transport routes along our coast).¹⁶ Clearly, if the maritime cultural landscape were defined as “the whole network of sailing routes, old as well as new, with ports and harbours along the coast, and its related constructions and remains of human activity, underwater as well as terrestrial¹⁷,” the cognitive landscape, including the place names, would certainly be included¹⁸, but also their interpretation.

Even if I am personally best acquainted with this Nordic area and my survey may therefore seem prejudiced in favour of this area, I do not think this geographical preponderance of exceptionally rich and relevant material is a coincidence. The richest elaboration of this cosmology, of myths and rituals of this kind, presupposes an equally rich archipelago with lobate and undulating coasts, striking contrasts between the high, often forbidding land and its steep cliffs, often all the way down to the water’s edge. And at the same time such an extreme wealth of relevant ritual sites is necessarily accompanied by difficult channels with an equal wealth of dangerous rocks, shallows and skerries. To be sure, these observations do not mean that I do not consider this cosmology universal in maritime environments. But the wealth of allusions could not have been recorded elsewhere to such a striking degree. It truly belongs to the Nordic heritage.

Scholars working in such fields as folkloristics, ethnology and linguistics, for example the Norwegians Svale Solheim and Per Hovda and the Dane Henning Henningsen, discovered *the*

ritual landscape of maritime culture. They did not refer to their discovery as such, but I did as an archaeologist, if at a much later date. Fragmentation into academic subjects had to be replaced by a holistic view of the totality. At the same time, I suddenly realized that almost all of this superstition must be *based on a contrast or antagonism between sea and land*.¹⁹

It was self-evident. Firstly, it was indeed at sea that this ritual behaviour or magic was practised. The inner space of the boat was its radius of action. Secondly, everything forbidden was in some way or other associated with or identified with land, the agrarian element, the farm, children, wild animals, the bailiff, the priest, definitely not only the women, or females in general. Where it appeared as an antagonism expressed by gender, the latter was always secondary to the relationship between sea and land. Gender was simply another way of expressing the dual structure. On land there were other rules. They were not as consistently applied, but some were influenced by the same representations, no doubt because of the double role of the fisherman/farmer. The everyday fisherman/sailor was also a small farmer or small peasant, although his wife and children managed a large part of the land-based economy. In a way, only his other existence applied the consistent taboos. On land there were other taboos, but infinitely weaker and much less consistent. But the sea was always there as a cognitive category and a point of reference.

The contrast between land and sea, as expressed by the patterns of superstition, was evidently based on a true *maritime culture*. It belonged to the identity of the practitioners of this culture. This was interesting, since the cognitive representations of social groups reveal their deepest feelings of identity. Otherwise my studies of the aspects of the maritime cultural landscape had only found *sliding transitions* between the seaboard and the inland cultures. The border between maritime and terrestrial was somewhat vague. This was something completely different, something much more clear-cut. The ritual landscape served as the best conceivable introduction to the cognitive element of maritime culture.

The sliding transition was described by the aspect I referred to as *the power landscape*. The folklorist Svalle Solheim conjectured that the aversion towards priests and bailiffs was essentially a reaction to the tyranny of authorities, "the wolves on two legs," as they were referred to by one *noa* name. This aversion had then been extended by the fishermen to apply to land conditions in general. British researchers explained the antagonism in much the same way.²⁰ As an explanation of function in the present this assumption appears reasonable. But from a historical perspective, such an explanation is obviously insufficient. It partially explains the present-day function of a custom, but nothing else. All other taboos aside from those pertaining to priests and bailiffs show the insufficiency of this partial approach to the complex. What is more, the priest was probably not taboo merely as a representative of the authorities but also because of his attitude towards magic, which he not only condemned but, in the imaginations of the fishermen, possibly also weakened with counter-magic. And that is apparently an old idea, originating long before the present generations, probably even before the Christian church.

Other functionalist interpretations concentrated more generally on the hazardous life of the professional fisherman who wanted to create safety by sticking to customary ritual or magic behaviour. From this point of view, the practises were mainly the reflection of a risky business.²¹ Solheim believed that the fisherman worried about the life of his family on land and what could happen during his absence.

Structuralists, for their part, tend to stress a relational dualism as expressed in gender, nature/culture, private/public, etc. One of the most consistent of these explanations for the appearance of dichotomies in recent times is that by Vestergaard (1981). The dual oppositions are manifold but logical:

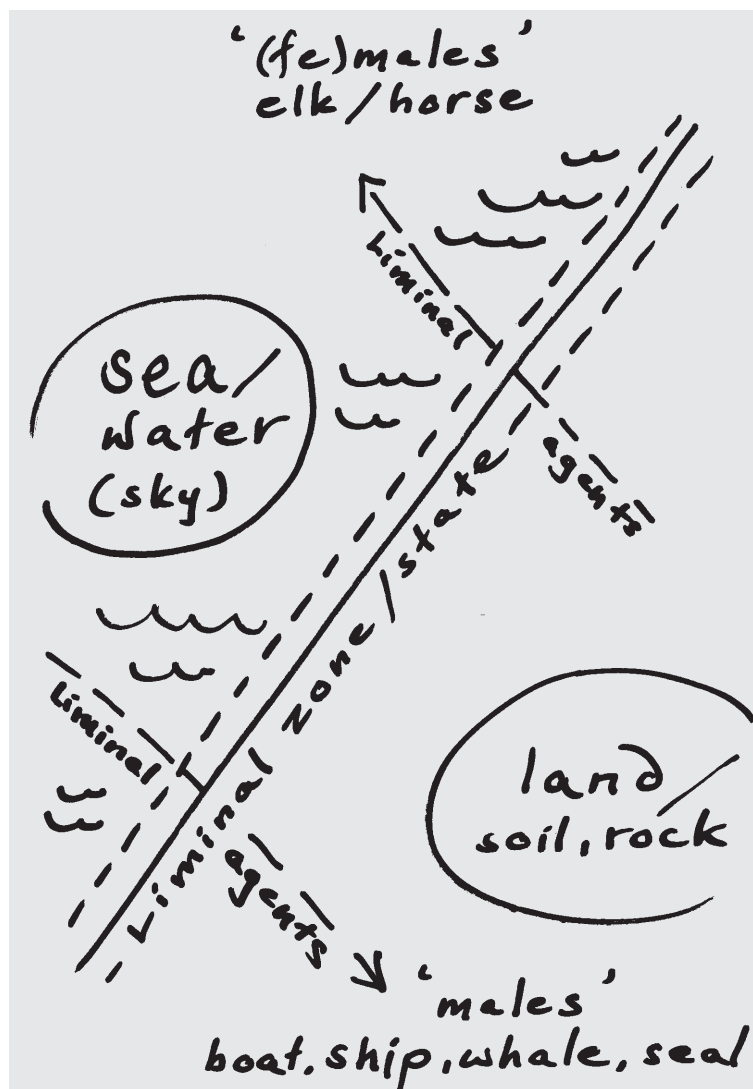
A.	contrasted to:	B.
culture		nature
male		female
familiar		strange
public		private
profane		sacral

Vestergård significantly describes her own studies as *social cosmology*. It is considered to have extended validity in Europe as well as the Mediterranean region. Just a few aspects will be referred to here: The taboos applied in the Faroes to animals are satisfactorily explained by way of their gender and, accordingly, their categorization under one of the two categories. Sheep belong to the male sphere and do not require taboos. But cows do, since they belong to the female sphere.²² Apart from being wild and thus belonging to nature, the raven and crow are animals inimical to culture and are accordingly charged with power, magical potential and ritual behaviour such as taboos. The current social cosmology in which some of these taboos acquire a function has indeed been admirably explored in this structural dimension.

However, even if the dual structure of opposites referred to in the A-B scheme could be extended to other epochs of human history, I find it largely irrelevant on the level of cosmology which is my theme. Social cosmology has always existed side by side with environmental cosmology. Partly they are identical. They have cross-fertilized each other by way of metaphors and cognition. The kind of supernaturally founded magic which was applied in prehistoric societies certainly depended on *other social cosmologies*, although the same categories A-B might still be interesting to us. But these categories would be interspersed by those supplied by altogether different social configurations. In recent traditional societies, the crucial behaviour and cognition associated with life (birth) and death (burial), the passage rites (initiation in stages), ritual (and to some extent even magic) as well as morals (right/wrong) were governed by the relationship to an “all-pervasive” established church structure and the regulations imposed by a legal system and the hierarchy of an “all-powerful” state. The Faroes of the nineteenth century were part of a developed Western society, although retaining a clear identity of their own. These “modern” elements have certainly made their way into – and to some extent distorted – what I believe is a fairly consistent belief pattern based on *the environment* rather than on a formal society. But such a basic dualism of sea and land is in no way unrelated to society and economy. On the contrary, it conforms to the two basic subsistence strategies of combined hunting, gathering and fishing societies²³, as well as of farming, hunting and fishing societies. This would perhaps best be described as a *diachronic* perspective, but also as cutting across local or regional identities such as the Faroese.

The societal component thus makes it likely that the character of some taboos and other ritual or “cognitive” behaviour analysed by Vestergård is a *synchronic* function, acquired over time.

The representatives of land may change, but the fundamental antagonism appears the same throughout the centuries. The kind of magic associated with this antagonism is not known only from recent centuries but at least from the beginnings of the sixteenth century. Place names certainly allow us to assume that these practises hark back to the Middle Ages. And judging by the nature of such matters, they would reasonably be much, much older. Thus, for example, the priest, as a male representative of land, must have had other predecessors. In anthropological literature it has been pointed out since the late nineteenth century that *the motives used among the practitioners of an ancient custom vary with the current conditions*. So do its functions. Wise old men like Heinrich Schurtz and Wilhelm Wundt, once giants in their field, are no longer read widely.²⁴ They have been left behind and are *passé* in the history of ideas. Everything they said, even the many wise and reasonable things, has been forgotten. But in this respect



Sketch A Principal sketch of the ritual meeting between land and sea.
(Drawing: Christer Westerdahl)

they provided a better picture of the diachronic and polysemic aspects than is normally the case today.

The basis for this superstition and this ritual behaviour may therefore lie in something else and much more fundamental. I am convinced it does. The basic conception of the opposition of land and sea and passages between them, developed in the following text, is illustrated by the sketch A.

Gender?

The antagonism between sea and land could be seen as a consistent belief pervading all elements implied. The division into gender, or sex, appears as a secondary contrast. In a certain situation,

the female element was identified with land. In this situation, in recent Scandinavia and adjacent areas, she represented – according to a somewhat simplified view – the agrarian economy and the subsistence on land products, in her capacity as organizer in this sphere, while her husband was out fishing or at sea as a sailor. But her role was in fact as varied as the infinite possibilities of emphasis on niches in maritime life. In my research area, she was or had invariably been a partner in pair-fishing with her husband, brother or father, and could not possibly be unwelcome on board.

Apart from this temporary gender role, another interesting pattern can be discerned. It was obvious that certain female beings may in fact bring extraordinary luck at sea, both by meeting fishermen on the way to the boat, or their being out at sea. It was clear that the living favourable ones were very special, in some way or other they were outsiders, or abnormal as it were.²⁵

The same pattern was valid in the case of supernatural beings represented as females. The mermaid or, as she is called in the North, *Sjöjungfrun* or *Jungfrun* (*Jomfrun*), ‘the sea virgin,’ or *havsrået*, was the quintessential *Mistress of the Sea*. In this case we must forget entirely the sweet and gentle apparition of the Little Mermaid, *Den lille Havfrue*, on Langelinie in Copenhagen. The “real” mermaid was conceived of as being infinitely more powerful but also fickle and easily offended. The memories of her are contained in a large number of place names of important sites of magic at sea. I am constantly reminded of the dangerous names of *Nerrivik*, the sea-woman of Inuit cosmology.²⁶

The significance of the island *Blå Jungfrun*, ‘Blue Virgin’ or, in Low Dutch / Low German *Zweedse Jounvrouw* or *Swedish Virgin* (fig. 1) was already pointed out by the early ethnographer Olaus Magnus in 1555.²⁷ The sacred status of these *Jungfru* sites is obvious, not only from testimonies of tradition. Outside the mainland of the Swedish province of Hälsingland is the large island *Stor-Jungfrun*, ‘the Great Virgin,’ otherwise known as *Helgön*, ‘The Sacred Island.’²⁸ These names can be dated to some extent. *Helgön* may well be prehistoric. Before the German word *Jungfrau* began to replace the word for ‘virgin’ in Nordic languages during the fifteenth century, the indigenous word was *mö*. This word is still often found in place names referring to the same type of sites. There are numerous references to females in dangerous and charged places. Per Hovda has shown that this has a transcendent meaning in the fairly mundane-appearing element *Kjerring* as used for names of skerries.²⁹ *Kjerring* means ‘old woman, crone, hag,’ but also, with a slightly affectionate connotation, ‘(my) wife.’ These names are found all over the North, but there are others as well.

The Norwegian parson Peder Claussøn Friis tells us from ca. 1600 AD that the sailors replaced the name of the island *Jomfruland* at Kragerö, an important sighting point, with the name *Landet Gode* while passing it.³⁰ This is a typical *noa* name, and recurs as such, but in this case the forbidden name contains the element *Jomfru* whereas *Landet Gode* is the *noa* name. The oldest known name of *Jomfruland* is *Aurr*, ‘the gravelly (island).’ The presumably “most forbidden” name of *Blå Jungfrun* is *Blåkulla*, which is the traditional name of the foremost meeting-place of witches.³¹ In Germany this supposed meeting-place is located far inland on the Blocksberg in the Harz mountain range. The cases of *Blå Jungfrun* and a couple of others indicate that a certain locality may have carried many different names. The case of *Jomfruland* shows that a *noa* name sooner or later becomes the normal name. This is also the case with several other sites.

To find evidence of this mechanism, it is difficult to reach further back than late Christian



Fig. 1 The contours of *Blå Jungfrun* Island, home of the mermaid and the witches. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1978)



Fig. 2 The dangerous cape of Kullen, or *Bonden*, at the entrance to The Sound, Öresund, probably the most well-known site of sailors' baptism in Europe. (Anthonis Goeteeris, AD 1619)

times. There are few sources to rely on. But it seems to me of some consequence that many medieval chapels on islands in the North almost invariably seem to have had a tale of origin connected with a virgin of high status directly or indirectly founding the building or the churchyard. Folk cosmology would have tended to identify her with the mermaid rather than with the Virgin Mary or St. Sunniva of Selje, Norway.³²

Apparently for the same reasons, quite a number of islands and mountainous sighting points were called *Bonden*, 'the farmer,' at sea, even though they had other names on land, such *Kullen* i Skåne (fig. 2) or *Kinnekekulle* in Lake Vänern. The oldest known name of Kullen is likely to be *Skjold*, 'the Shield,' in this case only preserved in the name of the nearby bay *Skälderviken*.³³ Several other such indications can thus be cited to show that a certain magic locality had several names in succession, the *noa* name replacing the old name as the regular name, the *noa*



Fig. 3 The island Högbonden, Ångermanland, Sweden, with its lighthouse. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1990)

name becoming the forbidden name and so forth. The magic of such places could be exceedingly strong, even on an inland lake. The hill of *Kinnekekulle* was so charged with power, one of my informants told me, that it might be dangerous even to fix one's gaze upon it.³⁴

Most of the original names of such places have now disappeared. Only the *noa* name has survived in the names of several islands called *Bonden*, *Högbonden*, (fig. 3, map fig. 4), etc.³⁵ It can easily be understood that they are all important sighting points at sea. Some possess other ritual aspects as well. In the case of Kullen, we have the

most famous site of sailors' baptism in the North. It has largely been forgotten that the Equator, the Line, is not alone in this function. The large number of such sites, including *Blå Jungfrun*, in the Baltic and the Kattegat/ Skagerak indicates that the custom emerged here, probably in the latter half of the fifteenth century.³⁶

By way of comparison, it can thus be established that not only virgins but also male beings, supernatural or not, could be favourable in magic-related behaviour at sea. Gender works as a contrast but there is no fixed role for the sexes, land or sea. But it is certainly a virile world in general.

Initiation rites in fishing

The prerequisites for sailor's baptism (map, fig. 6) are the ritual customs in fishing. As we have observed above, fishing provides the primary economy and the primary cognitive patterns in maritime culture. These customs have been well accounted for in the North, in particular in Norway. Many dangerous places with rocks and shallows must be memorized by the young apprentices in fishing. They faithfully mark the old sailing routes, as pointed out by Solheim (above). A forbidden (land) name is used for this locality, like *Bjønn*, *Björnen*, 'the Bear,' *Kråka*, *Kråkan*, 'the Crow,' *Galten*, *Grisen*, 'the Pig (Boar),' *Hesten*, *Hästen*, 'the Horse'³⁷, in spite of the taboo for such names at sea. The intention is to warn sailors, who know the rules: such names must mean something special, something dangerous. So they are made favourable nonetheless. With regard to Norway, this complex has also been treated by Per Hovda.³⁸

The taboo was extended to other wild animals as well, which may have further implications, especially for prehistoric representations. The well-known natural sea mark in southernmost Rogaland, *Hådyret*, Old Norse *hādýr*, obviously means 'the high deer' or 'the high stag'.³⁹ This seems to be a clear *noa* name.⁴⁰ I see it as an abstraction, a metaphor of *the most impressive animal of the land*, the animal *par préférence*, the really big game. In the old days it might have been an elk.

When passing a locality with such a name, the apprentice is wheedled into pronouncing the forbidden name. Having committed such a transgression, he is forced to make a sacrifice of some kind. During the last century this consisted in treating his mates to a tot of brandy. In recent times, more practical jokes may have been applied, such as involuntary baptism. This is a classical rite of initiation or rite of passage as an-

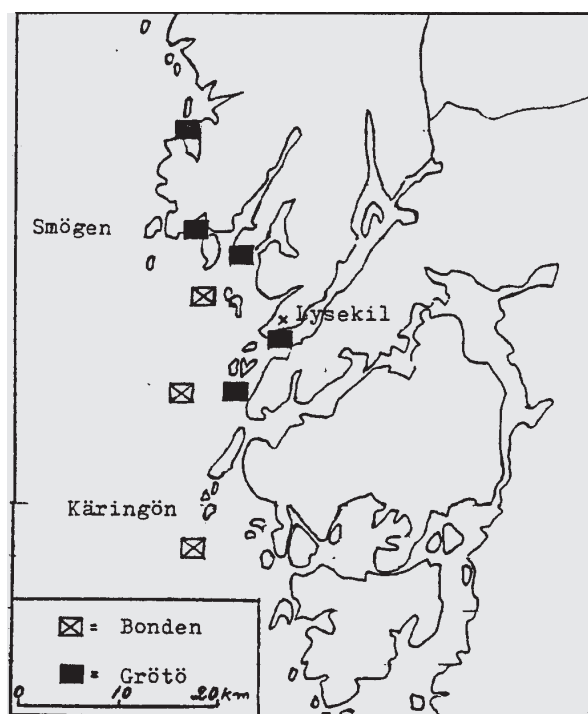


Fig. 4 Assumed *noa* names of *Bonden* names in a small area near the town of Lysekil, Bohuslän, West Sweden. (After Fries 1989)



Fig. 5 The bright patch is the natural sea mark *Hådyret* in southernmost Rogaland, Western Norway. Old Norse *hādýr* evidently points to a stag (Særheim 2005). According to the author the place name is an example of a liminal agent. (Photo: Endre Elvestad, The Maritime Museum of Stavanger)



Fig. 7 Several kinds of sorcery are performed in a maritime milieu in this picture by Olaus Magnus, *Historia* 3:16, AD 1555. To the right is a seal's skull on a pole, held by a male figure.

forbidden, in one element or the other, they possess magical power there. Such agents are whales and seals, but presumably not the mundane fishes. But cf. below on the halibut!

This transfer across the border should be made by a human being, either physically or symbolically. According to some records of tradition, the transfer can be dangerous to the human being carrying it out. One example is the head or cranium of a seal (fig. 7) which was brought on land to be buried at the threshold of a cowshed to protect it and its animals. Within living memory, it could also be used to bring fish into a sterile lake. The individual doing this must be very careful not to provoke the wrath of the powers. A possible means of avoiding being "iden-

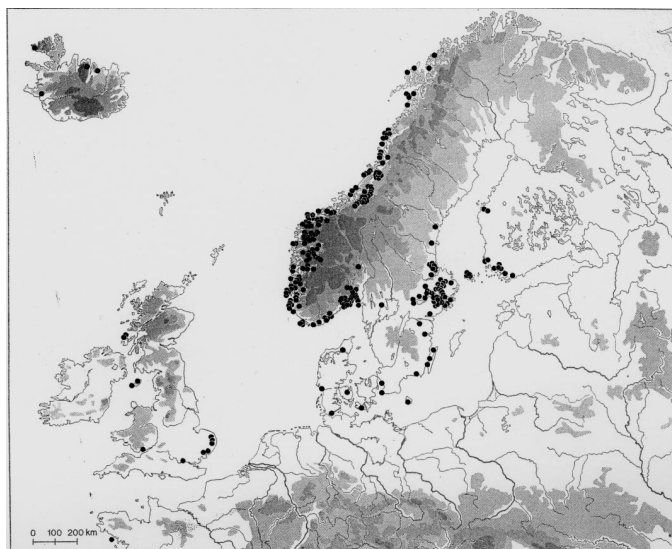


Fig. 8 Map of ship burial sites in the north. (After Müller-Wille 1970)



Fig. 9 The ship setting of Gannarve, Gotland, Sweden. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl 1996)

tified" as the perpetrator (or possibly the superstitious fellow practising magic) was the use of impersonal fire to burn the stake on which the cranium was hanging in order to let it down into the water "by itself."⁴³

If we transfer this mechanism to another element associated with the sea – the *boat* – we can see that it has been used for a wide range of sacred or magical purposes on land. I am indeed inclined to introduce this cosmological function as one of several explanations for *pre-historic ships or boats used in burials*⁴⁴ (map fig. 8), *ship settings*⁴⁵ (fig. 9, map fig. 10) and

also medieval *votive ships* in churches or *boats used in carnival processions*. It seems as if the *magic function of the liminal space of the boat's interior was recreated on land*. We remember that it is precisely this space which governs the extension of ritual behaviour in recent folklore. As to the symbolic use of the boat on land or as a pictorial symbol, there is an overwhelming and almost unbroken tradition during Nordic prehistory.⁴⁶

Conceptually, the boat has a complicated relationship to both elements, land and sea, since it is also very much a thing of the land. This may sound like a banality. Still, it is probable that the

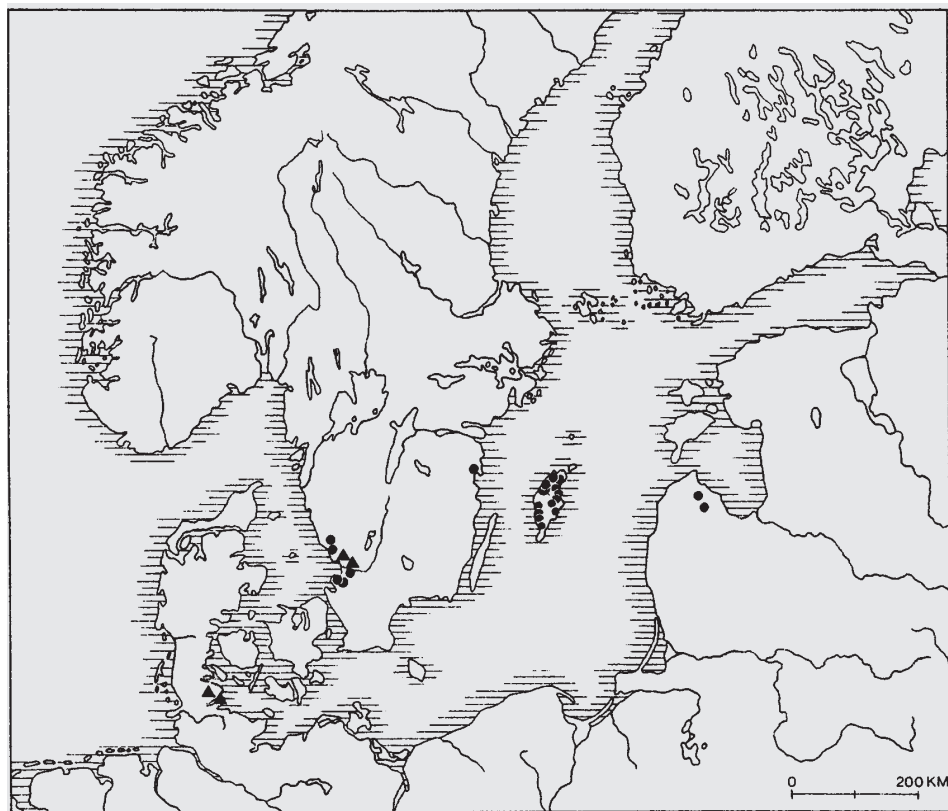


Fig. 10 Map of dated Bronze Age ship settings, according to Capelle 1995.

boat was originally cognitively identified with land, being built entirely of land materials, and got its particular symbolic (and real!) power by way of transfer to the wet element. As it happens, this transfer is a ceremony even today not conducted by just anyone, but invariably by a woman. This is, however, a late development, probably dating from the early nineteenth century. But the ceremony on the shore is inescapable in any maritime culture.⁴⁷

The *grave ships* or *ship settings* are as much a recurring theme as the boat depictions.⁴⁸ At their margins we also find vessels or parts thereof immersed in wetlands, with further polysemic implications. One is of course that the “wet” technology of the Iron Age in the North required immersion in water for a certain period. The liminal state is found anywhere at the water surface. The oldest known burials in a boat were obviously made with a Mesolithic or Neolithic log boat in the water, moored to a pole.⁴⁹

It is well in line with the suggestion of the ship as a paramount liminal agent that the carnivals themselves – boat on a cart or not – attain a liminal status. Their significance is found in terms of a rite, like the Roman *saturnalia*, where reversals of time are marked by way of the momentary freedom of social restraints. The poor can mock and laugh at the rich. This is *communitas*, antistructure, according to Victor Turner, but it may as well mean compensation and perpetuation of the social structure, or it may mean popular resistance momentarily or in the end.⁵⁰

The basic meaning of the *votive church ship* is different. It is more easily perceived as a luck charm to the parish or chapel community and at the same time a status symbol of maritime individuals, groups and communities.⁵¹

For this reason, I think it is most probable that any such magic transfer could be repeated several times. That is to say that the properties of magic work not only for the element immediately concerned but also the other, sea or land. It is easy to imagine that since the ship has passed one border it will be able to pass another. Below I will treat the liminal state tangibly as the water surface or the shore, the border between sea and land.

But the liminal state works in several cognitive dimensions. Life and death is another, especially in connection with the ship as the carrier of the sun, from light to darkness and back again. These seem to be some of the combined reasons for the significance of the ship in burials. It should be noted that the appearance of sacrificial horses in ship burials would make the representation of land- and sea-based liminal agents complete. The liminal role of the horse in the sepulchral sphere can be pointed out also in connection with its quality of *psychopomp* in Nordic mythology. Odin lent out his own horse *Sleipnir* to elite warriors. It has eight feet and is conspicuous on some of the Gotlandic picture stones, along with a ship. Not only the transport aspect, however, but also the journey to Walhalla⁵² might be intended. The polysemic roles of the prehistoric horse and ship have been given ample attention in recent discussions of these subjects.⁵³

The potential of rock carvings in this respect is striking. But the classical problem of interpretation has obscured the discussion on meaning: Do they depict mythology or cult/ritual scenes? Perhaps it would be fair to say that this is not a very productive question. The myth could be re-enacted in the cult. A myth of creation is normally repeated as a cultic show to ensure continuity of the eternal cycle of life. On the other hand, the actual practise of the ritual would reasonably influence details of the myth. In this context I will not comment on the possible connection of rock carvings with burials or the sepulchral associations of the ship figure, which naturally comes into mind when contemplating the ship-formed graves of the same period.⁵⁴

In the arctic hunting and fishing tradition of rock carvings, the proportion of boats is fairly small at the outset but increases significantly towards the end, which may be as late as the Iron Age.⁵⁵ In the southern agrarian tradition of the Bronze Age, the ship is the most common of all representational motifs, varying from an all-time low of approximately 25% in Denmark⁵⁶ to some 80% in the west of Norway.⁵⁷

Apart from the use of any kind of ship as a symbol in Bronze Age rock carvings, there is a

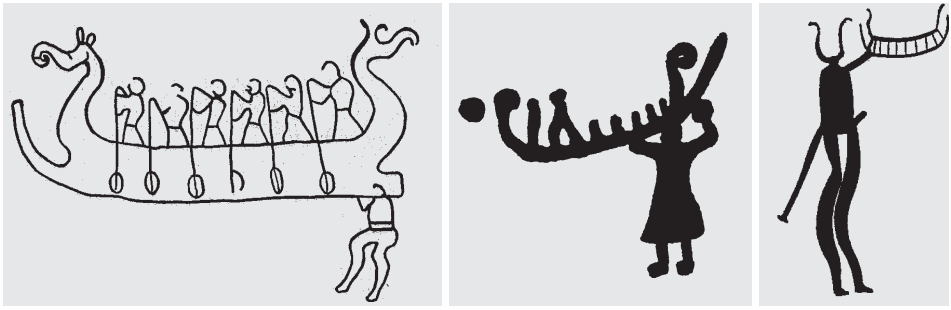


Fig. 11 Some examples of the “boat-lifting feat,” the large ship from Brandskog, Uppland, the other two from Bohuslän and Östergötland, Sweden. The same motif is found at other sites in Sweden and Norway.

characteristic scene recurring in many places and on many panels. A male figure, sometimes disproportionately large in comparison with the ship (if the latter is thought of as life-size), is depicted as carrying or lifting the ship, sometimes with its crew on board. The most famous instance is one of the largest and most naturalistic of all Bronze Age rock-carved vessels (if it really is Bronze Age and not Iron Age?), the *Brandskog* ship, nearly five metres long, of Uppland, Sweden (fig. 11). The late Swedish religious historian Åke Ohlmarks, who still seriously attempted to identify rock carving figures with gods and heroes of Nordic medieval myths documented almost two thousand years later, was at a loss to identify any known situation with this figure. He called the scene more or less neutrally *Båtlyftarbragden*, ‘the boat lifting feat.’⁵⁸ This is what I would call a *window* to the meaning. I would interpret it as *the transfer of the boat to another element, in this case land*.⁵⁹ The carving itself is certainly supposed to bring luck, but it would be futile to propose any other hypothetical details. Naturally, such a motif can be interpreted much more tangibly as a magic transport of an actual vessel across land. The fairly normal portage may have been thought of as a ceremony.⁶⁰ Or the motif may represent a boat or boat model procession on land.

The Swedish pioneer Oscar Almgren⁶¹ and much later the Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob⁶² seriously considered the possibility that the ships on the rocks could have been models of real ones. This would have been more or less in the same vein as votive church ships, or rather the ships carried or driven on carts as important elements of carnivals on land, sometimes known precisely as *boat carnivals* or *boat pageants*. Apart from the somewhat ambiguous evidence of the carvings (with regard to the interpretation of details), archaeological finds like the famous bronze figures of Fårdal and Grevensvænge in Denmark may very well have been affixed to a miniature boat or model (fig. 12). The foremost Nordic maritime folklorist, the Dane Henning

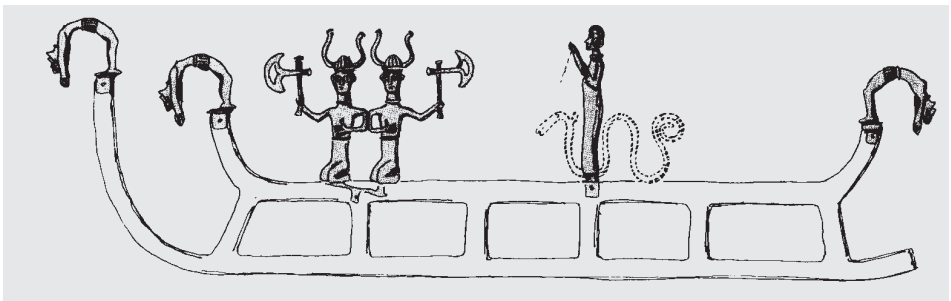


Fig. 12 A tentative model ship of the rock carving type with the figurines of Grevensvænge, Denmark. (After Glob 1962)

Henningsen, described such customs in historical times, including sailor's baptism, but without seeing any pattern like that proposed here.⁶³ My hypothesis does not decisively influence the old bone of contention among interpreters of rock carvings, whether the pictures represent cult or myth. They might do both or either, depending on the context. I have merely shifted my emphasis precisely to cosmology, which may be closer to beliefs than to action. The mythology of the sun, as recently expounded by Flemming Kaul⁶⁴, does not exclude the fundamental cosmology of the liminal agent between sea and land.

Heads of land animals at sea, of sea animals on land

Why do the ships of the rock carvings almost invariably bear heads of land animals on their stem-pieces? In the North, the heads are without a doubt those of elks (fig. 25, but also Brandskog, fig. 11, which is Bronze Age and southern; is it an elk or a horse?). In this arctic hunting and fishing tradition, the majority of figurative motifs probably depict elks, to some extent other wild animals, including reindeers in the far north. Whales are more widespread. The elk is the predominant motif also in paintings. Already from 5700 BC we have a unique dated wooden sculpture of an elk head with this potential, that of *Lehtojärvi* in Rovaniemi, northern Finland (fig. 13). This find is contemporary with some of the oldest dated rock carvings, ca. 6000 BC.

During the Bronze Age in the south, ca. 1800-500 BC, horse's heads adorned the stems of the ships on the rocks.⁶⁵ As we can also see from later tradition, the horse was one of the most tabooed animals at sea. If one can judge from the number of *noa* names, the horse was perhaps the most forbidden prominent animal of all. In Shetland the name of the horse had 13 *noa* replacements, if this is to be taken as a measure of its power. In fact there are other animals – the cat and the pig – with the same number of *noa*-names or more. But except the boar, they have never been much revered by man, and they are not graphically identifiable as stem adornments anyway, which is presumably a shade more decisive. If land animals were taboo at sea during the Bronze Age, we may have a case of an apotropaic function, i.e. protective and averting, at sea.

This is not a phenomenon restricted to the north. *Hippos*, plur. *hippoi*, Greek for 'horse,' was the term for a well-known ship type, apparently of Phoenician origin in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Iron Age, probably emerging somewhat later than 1000 BC, but contemporary with the later part of the Nordic Bronze Age. Its stem had a horse's head. Such boats were still sailing the Mediterranean in the beginning of the 2nd century AD, according to Strabo. A mighty stag with impressive

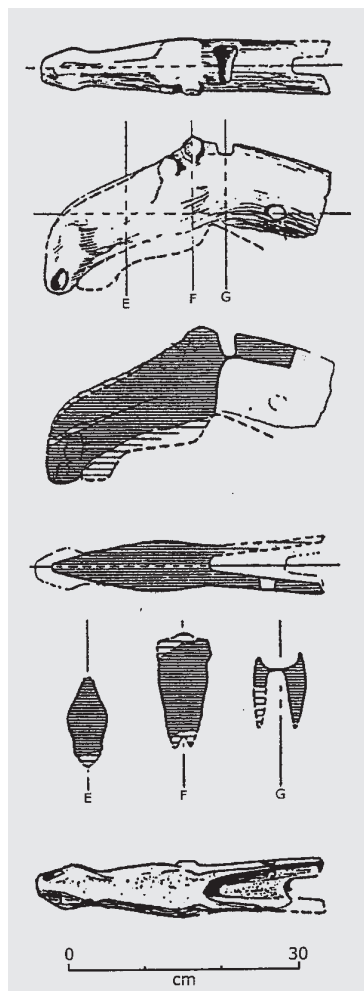


Fig. 13 The wooden elk head of Lehtojärvi, Rovaniemi, ca. 5700 BC. (After Erä-Esko 1958)

antlers is attached to the stem in the Sardinian bronze ship models, probably lamps, of the Early Iron Age (ca. 700-400 BC). The cranium of an ox was the figurehead of a large Irish curragh depicted in the late seventeenth century.⁶⁶ The fishermen of Cadiz in south Spain used to carve wooden horse heads and put them at the stems of their boats in the first part of the 20th century AD. Maybe early names of individual boats could reflect this magic of land animals and – as mentioned above – female beings, using words for animals, the ox, the horse, female proper names. etc.

But the ship must also have been significant on land. The seal was mentioned above in the same function.⁶⁷ As to the figures in rock carvings of the arctic tradition, the large number of whales depicted may have borne a related significance to land.

Some comparisons across time and space

In Northern Scandinavia, the land upheaval must have contributed to the postulated cosmology. But how? The changes were perceptible during a single lifespan, but the impression would have been strengthened from generation to generation by means of tradition: *The land conquers the sea*.⁶⁸ Not much survives of probable prehistoric ideas, in fact only one, as far as I know:

*Gotland was first discovered by a man named Tjelvar. At that time the island was so bewitched that it sank by day and rose up at night. That man, however, was the first that brought fire to the island and afterwards it never sank again.*⁶⁹

Tjelvar later became the ancestor of all Gotlanders. This is the opening passage of the *Guta saga* on the origin of the Gotlanders. The manuscript of the *saga* probably dates from the late thirteenth century.⁷⁰ It seems reasonable to suppose that the occurrences of marine fossils were discovered early by the inhabitants of the island. But would not this *saga* be an indication of the mysterious relationship between sea and land? Together with Michal Artzy I have proposed that the fire of Tjelvar is depicted as a round symbol on early Gotlandic picture stones.⁷¹ The fire is the medium that makes the wet thing dry, and transforms it, from sea to land. I also suggested that Tjelvar, who is obviously identical to the companion *Tjalfi* of the god *Thor* in Nordic mythology, is a *trickster* figure like Prometheus of the Greeks, who brought fire to mankind. The notion that liminal agents would develop precisely into tricksters has been expressed elsewhere in this text (below on *Loki*).

Another aspect concerns the mythical significance of this new land: Was it possibly sacred or hallowed in any way? Even in southern Scandinavia, new land could emerge. The island *Saltholm* in the Sound (Øresund) emerged in the Neolithic as a huge skerry-like limestone shallow visible from both sides. My onetime colleague in Copenhagen, Dr. Klaus Ebbesen, informed me that this limestone, which is easily identified, was mined on the island, transported by boat and put in a crushed state on the floor of at least ten known *hellekister* (stone cists) of the Late Neolithic on both sides of the Sound. Does this mean that the new land and its rock were considered liminally important for burials?

Is the dichotomy between sea and land a universal idea even in prehistory? Although I still believe that this kind of cosmology is closer to magic than formalized religion, traces may be found in the latter. As to the Mediterranean, the Maltese archaeologist Reuben Grima has proposed the interpretation that the arrangement in the Maltese Bronze Age temples of ca. 3500-2500 BC was based on a contrast between the sea and the land as the basic elements.⁷²

As far as I can determine, a classical taboo situation is indicated in a veiled state in the stanzas of the *Odyssey* retelling the Song of the Sirens in ca. 700 BC. It is an obvious circumlocution of the fact that the danger of the land is represented by the Sirens. Ulysses challenges the taboo by hearing their seductive singing with impunity. To do so, he has to be lashed to the mast

during the passage, and the crew, who wear plugs of wax in their ears, must not take any notice of him, who is otherwise the undisputed skipper. In the continuation of the same text⁷³, it is even indicated in passing that the horns of a domestic land animal, the ox, can be used for magic while fishing by being sunk into the sea. This passage is used as a kind of simile when six of Ulysses' men are snatched away by Scylla:

"Even as when a fisher on some headland lets down with a long rod his baits for a snare to the little fishes below, casting into the depths the *horn of an ox of the homestead*, and as he catches each flings it writhing ashore, so writhing were they borne upward to the cliff ..."

This is entirely consistent with the implicated principles of magic using the liminal passage. Whatever is land, as *pars pro toto*, could be strong at sea. In this case it is the horn of an ox.

During classical antiquity, we know that sacrifices were made to the sea in the neighbourhood of important sighting points, passages of capes, high promontories, etc. These localities were also important meeting places, at which there were temples, graves and other markings.⁷⁴ There is, as far I know, no explicit authority suggesting that they reflect any sea-land contrast. But I strongly suspect just that (fig. 14).

Very little evidence of any "secret" maritime cosmology of the Nordic kind has been preserved in the Mediterranean in recent times. The apparent lack of corresponding material is indeed stunning. As has been shown, this is a sensitive knowledge. Would it be quite preposterous to suggest that a hindrance may have been presented by the fact that, during a critical period for the survival of such magic, there was in the Mediterranean region a more hierarchical relationship between scholars and lowly superstitious informants than in the North? And as Henningsen⁷⁵ suggests concerning the early lack of testimonies of the sailors themselves on baptism at sea, there may "even have been a sort of taboo about it."

The Canadian archaeologist Robert McGhee has shown that the Inuit Thule culture of ca. 1000 AD only permitted objects from land to be used in hunting on land and only objects from the sea for hunting there. The title of this study, *Ivory for the Sea Woman*⁷⁶, reflects the distinct gender division between land and sea. Indeed, it does not reflect the same contents as my proposal, but rather the reverse, yet it certainly shows the existence of a strong contrast or antagonism between the sea and the land. Accordingly, this evidence does not change my proposal in any way. On the contrary, it strengthens it, by pointing out its cosmologically founded variations, its potential *polysemy*. In the interchangeability of *Bonden* and *Jungfrun* as representatives of the sexes, I think I have potentially the same reverse mechanism. According to Leif Zeilich-Jensen, land and sea constitute the pair of opposites that is the dominating axis of recent Inuit culture, and he illustrates the effects by recording that future favours were expected by giving fresh water to sea mammals which had been killed, and blubber oil to land animals, precisely the effect of border-crossing liminal agents.⁷⁷ It has also been recorded that in the Swedish shieling system (*fäbodlar, säter*) of the northern forests, the act of giving seal blubber to cattle was believed to have magical properties. According to some statements, it was the same in Norway, either with herring blubber or whale blubber.⁷⁸



Fig. 14 The impressive promontory of Ras Il-Wardija on Gozo, Maltese islands. A large cairn-like structure – actually a rock-cut Punico-Hellenistic sanctuary – can clearly be seen at the top. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 2003)

As has been mentioned, stone was taboo at sea. Perhaps an approach like that of McGhee can provide new perspectives on the production and choice of stone materials, and not only in a maritime milieu. Bryan Hood considers some of the diverging stone material of coastal Norway as an intentional marking of the origin of the dwellers inland.⁷⁹ On the other hand, the “people of the red stone” is a term of Åsa Lundberg, denoting a Neolithic slate culture with a possible origin of its materials on the Baltic coast of Ångermanland.⁸⁰ The most extreme location of a stone quarry in the North is the green-stone site at the exposed skerry of Hespriholmen, Bømlo, West Norway.⁸¹ Did it play a particular cognitive role for the axes made here for the groups of the mainland coast? Close to another great quarry, in this case of diabase, at Halleberg, Västergötland, Sweden, axes and axe forms were deposited, apparently ritually, in a waterlogged state, on Lake Vänern.⁸²

Liminal state and liminal agents

Thus it is apparently the contrast, and thereby the transition between land and water, that is relevant for this magical mechanism. It is at the same time the most definite border provided by nature. I have suggested therefore that it is the cognitive border *par préférence* of environmental cosmology. Such a stage or state is usually called *liminal*. The concept ‘liminal’ is derived from the Latin *limen*, gen. *liminis*, which means ‘threshold.’ It is remarkable though, that in Greek, the other great classical language, closely related to Latin, two almost identical words, *ho limän*, *λῑμῑν*, masc., and *hä limnä*, *λῑμνῑ*, fem., refer to harbours and tidal estuaries, respectively.⁸³ The different genders may have further implications. The difference in meaning may well be a reflection of the maritime character of Greek civilization, whereas the fundamentally terrestrial Romans denoted something having to do with the home.⁸⁴

In our version, the liminal zone is the beach or, more specifically, the tidal area, generally between high and low tide, corresponding to the feminine Greek word. An intentional passage across this liminal area is supposed to endow magic power. But it is full of dangers. As we have seen, anything could happen to the fisherman on his way down to the boat. A bad omen, a woman – of the dangerous kind –, a parson, an unsuitable or ominous utterance by a passer-by, etc. might induce him to go back home. If the contrast between land and sea was important to prehistoric people, as it was in the recent past, we would indeed expect the border, the liminal state, between them to be marked by distinct monuments. As we will see, this is indeed the case: rock carvings, burial cairns/mounds, etc.

But, as we have also seen, some tabooed things were favourable precisely because they passed with impunity, or rather were made to pass the liminal area or stage. *Liminal agents* is the general term I have invented for these magic words which were used intentionally as *noa* words or *noa* names, the gender complex of *Bonden*, *Jungfrun*, certain women at sea, ship names, ships on land, but also whales and seals on land, land animals like horses and elks at sea. To return to the ship’s dog and the ship’s cat, they are – on a modest scale and in everyday sea life – the most obvious liminal agents, bringing luck to all ships, precisely because they are taboo on them. No ship could do without them.⁸⁵ It is important to underline that any words or names can be used as liminal agents, in fact almost any kind of cultural action or manifestation of the senses. At least some of those who make the passage across the liminal field can presumably return and obtain new power on the other side. The most salient example of an object returning to land would be the all-embracing prehistoric use of boats and ships as symbols and markings in burials/graves, pictures, votive ships, boat pageants and processions, presumably all occasions for ritual.⁸⁶

There are very few clear illustrations of the cosmology in question. Perhaps it should only be

expected that such references are indirect. But those which do exist could be called *windows* like the ‘boat-lifting feat’ discussed above. One example is a highly indicative rock carving (fig. 15) from Alta in Northern Norway, published by Knut Helskog. It depicts a boat at the top, bearing two people who are fishing with a very long line, at the end of which a large *kveite* (Norwegian for a halibut) has been hooked. At the same level as the halibut there stands an elk.⁸⁷ There are no pictorial scenes in the vicinity for which this elk would be relevant. This is the most evident “window” to the elk (or another land animal) at sea as a liminal agent that I have found. Certainly there must be others.

The choice of the halibut for the depiction may carry other implications. Richard Bradley has identified halibuts also on the Bronze Age carvings of Åmøy in Southwest Norway.⁸⁸ This large fish is called the sacred fish, *heilagr fiskr*, in ancient Norse⁸⁹, and the meaning still sticks to present-day Scandinavian with variations like *helleflyndre* or *hälleflundra*, since this is actually a corruption of *helgeflynndre*, ‘the holy flounder.’ This term is normally ascribed to its function as food during Catholic Lent⁹⁰, but there is no reason why it could not have much deeper roots. The richly elaborated taboos and ritual behaviour surrounding the halibut in fairly recent times would rather suggest such an interpretation.⁹¹

I also believe that the liminal agents have been thought of as interchangeable; i.e. they can replace and reinforce each other. In this capacity they can also be used several times, as mentioned above, more specifically concerning the role of ships in graves. If any liminal agent has crossed one border it will be able to cross others, in various possible dimensions, as elk, horse, seal, ship, shaman (below), etc. The *psychopomp* carrier of prominent dead personalities to the afterlife is still the horse *Sleipnir* in Nordic medieval mythology, and the dog *Kerberos* has an important role at the river of death, the *Styx*, which has to be crossed with the ferryman *Charon* of classical Greek mythology.

Human beings can also be used as liminal agents. It is easy to imagine some complications there, since men make a potentially liminal passage all the time in their daily life, that across the shore.⁹² However it is important to make the distinction between normal daily life and the role of the liminal agent. Magic is an intentional act, for a specific ritual purpose. The people who assume the role of a liminal agent could only be special, often outsiders, and liminal also in a social sense. The *shaman* is such a liminal agent. He is the great border-crosser in the cosmology of the Eurasian mainland. The perspectives are indeed much related, those of the liminality displayed by the shore and not least the significance of passages across it, which correspond to a number of opposites where the shaman/sorcerer himself is in-between, such as male/female, death/life, hot/cold, wild/domestic, etc.

I will merely indicate the possibility of finding such liminal human agents in rock pictures. A suitable environment would be that of the Norwegian cave paintings. There are at present at least ten prehistoric sites in Northern Norway where almost exclusively human figures have been painted precisely in the part of the cave where the transition occurs between light from the

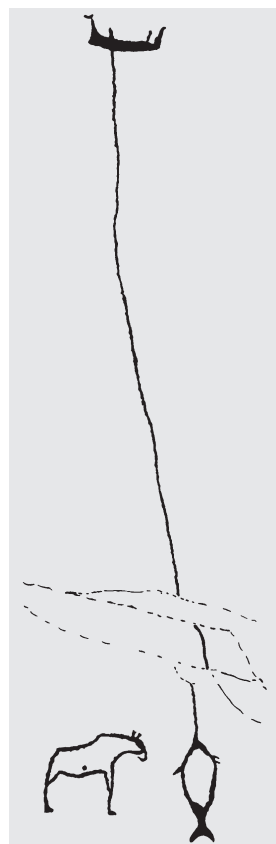


Fig. 15 A “window” to the interpretation of “liminal agents?” The elk is evidently not misplaced. Alta. The figure of the elk is somewhat vague, and may have been intended to depict a different land animal (a bear? [pers. comm. Knut Helskog, Tromsø]). (After Helskog 1988)



Fig. 16 Illustration of Finnish sorcerers onboard a ship in the harbour, waiting for a favourable wind. The male figure to the right shows the three knots of winds of international maritime folklore. (Olaus Magnus, *Historia* 3:16, AD 1555)

entrance and almost total darkness. This is indeed a parallel liminality to the transition of sea and land or between life and death. The sites have so far been found on islands and near the coast.⁹³

Social groups as liminal agents

In northern Europe and out on the seas of the world, the Finns were considered to be the main maritime sorcerers.⁹⁴ The application of witchcraft in *Winlandiae* was already recorded before the mid thirteenth century.⁹⁵ Olaus Magnus reports in 1555 (fig. 16) – with some pride! – on these sorcerers or magicians.⁹⁶ In maritime tradition, Finns were often feared as “Jonahs” on board.⁹⁷ Saamis had the same reputation, but mostly on land.⁹⁸ In my opinion, this point of view was based on an erroneous but powerful illusion: that the Finns and the Saamis were exclusively *inland* people.⁹⁹ This notion carried particular significance as the fairly recent “national” symbols of Swedish and Finnish-speaking groups of Finland.¹⁰⁰ The transfer of the abilities of Finns and Saamis and their power was made comparatively early to terrestrial environments. But the inception of their role might be their use in maritime culture.

There is an interesting application of the ship motif on a rock carving panel found fairly recently in Padjelanta in the Northern Swedish mountains, an entirely Saami milieu, in ca. 1000 metres above sea level.¹⁰¹ These well-executed square-rigged ships (fig. 17) can be dated to the early Viking Age, ca. 800 AD. This could be considered a magic act, reflecting the same basic cosmology, with ships as liminal agents.¹⁰² The ship motif is furthermore exhibited on seventeenth-century Saami drums, the vehicle of the shamans. According to accounts of informants of the latest centuries, the Saamis offered a boat model to their wind god, *Bieggolmai*. This may perhaps be the boat depicted on the drums,¹⁰³ but possibly there is another, cosmic, significance to this figure.

In social anthropology, there are several examples of groups and individuals which have been considered marginal, ambiguous and thereby liminal in a certain milieu. Authors treating such sociocultural attitudes are, for example, Victor Turner and Mary Helms.¹⁰⁴

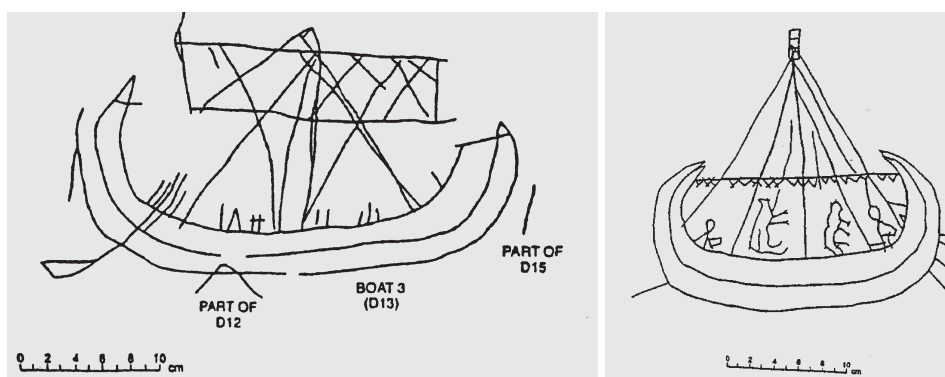


Fig. 17 Some of the ships carved in the Padjelanta National Park, North Sweden, at approx. 1,000 metres above sea level. (After Mulk 1998 or Bayliss-Smith/Mulk 1998)

The liminal zone along the shores

Since we have now proposed that it is possible to perceive a link between the sea-land dichotomy of recent folklore and prehistoric cognition, it is crucial to establish *whether the border between these two elements has been marked in any special way by archaeological remains*. Any place where both elements could be implicated, seen or felt at the same time is liminal.

For the Atlantic coast of Europe, Brian Cunliffe points out that the ‘cliff castles’ or ‘promontory forts,’ as they are known in British Isles, seem to be less defensive than liminal in function, “the main imperative being to create a defined enclave at the interface between land and sea.” He conjectures: “If, then, the domains of land and sea were conceived of as separate systems subject to their own very different supernatural powers, the interface between them was a liminal place, and as such was dangerous.”¹⁰⁵

In the north, the liminal zone at the water’s edge is once again well illustrated by rock carvings. This is particularly true of the arctic variety, that of the hunting and fishing cultures. With regard to Norway, this *location at the ancient shorelines* has been pointed out by Kalle Sognnes and Knut Helskog.¹⁰⁶ The contents of the carvings as well as their fusion of marine and terrestrial elements, referring to animals, have been emphasized by Christian Lindqvist.¹⁰⁷ There are exceptions to the role of the beach rocks, but they do not negate the general tendency. Besides, even the exceptions seem to exhibit a close relationship to water – not least in the later Bronze Age tradition (figs 18, 19, 20).

Unlike the coastal cairns and other fixed monuments on the shore (below), presumably in this case due to their contents (the burial, which would naturally require physical proximity to the liminal area), rock carvings may have been considered more independent. *The liminal area was re-created by the imposition of figures on rocks.*

I did not realize at first when formulating this idea that Richard Bradley¹⁰⁸ already had approached this problem from another angle and come up with a related idea. He proposes that the ships may “convey the idea of water itself”, *recreate a water-line* inland in connection with burial sites, where even the carvings of footsoles find an intelligent function, but in a sepulchral context.

It is assumed here that the liminal content of the rock carving was the border between sea and land. Thus a physical closeness to the actual seafront may not have been of crucial importance in some cases of rock carving panels far from the sea. In this sense one could perhaps compare them to the *re-creations of boat forms on land*, the ship settings, possibly the ship burials and – who knows? – the alleged boat or boat model processions indicated by certain rock carving



Fig. 18 The shore position of a ship carving at Vänernäs, Lake Vänern, Västergötland, Sweden. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 2002)



Fig. 19 Rock carving in Bohuslän, Sweden, with the effect of rain and snow melting. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1970)



Fig. 20 Rock carving in Bohuslän, Sweden, during rain. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1974)



Fig. 21 A group of coastal cairns at Gamle hamn/ St. Olofshamn, Fårön, North Gotland. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1996)

images. The sites farthest from the shore would then expose the practical aspect of the distance to which the maritime dichotomy would have been thought to extend on land.

The hunting culture of the north certainly depended on marine resources and maritime culture, with fishing and hunting sea mammals as the main themes. But the elk and other land animals were hunted inland, at least seasonally.

During the Neolithic, the maritime connection remained – generally speaking – but inland hunting was partially replaced by agrarian pursuits. Even today, Bronze Age rock art often has a liminal location, but not always at the very seaboard. To a considerable extent, this is a result of land uplift over 3,000 years. As already observed, it should not be denied, however, that there are a couple of carvings and, above all paintings, which do not conform to this pattern of relative proximity to larger bodies of water. However, it has long since been observed that rock carving panels often lie in *vannsigen*, a Norwegian term for precisely that part of the rock which is trickled over by any excess water, at many places shown clearly by brown manganese sediments. As pointed out above, perhaps this was seen as a re-creation of the liminal status of the waterline. On the other hand it must be pointed out that in prehistory this dark colouring, if it existed, must have been a good place to knock down pictures since they would presumably stand out as white against this background.

The contemporary Bronze Age location of the many *coastal burial cairns* (fig. 21), as well as the location of those certain to have been erected during the Iron Age, indicates that this liminal position is fundamental to cosmology.¹⁰⁹ A striking fact in some parts of the north, especial-

ly Swedish Norrland, is that the cairns were indeed erected precisely at the shore, although the land upheaval may have lifted them up to 25-45 metres above sea level today. What is more, there are no signs of settlement in the vicinity, a condition only to be expected since this is quite a barren zone, unsuitable for any kind of agrarian activity or permanent settlement. Although the material for building cairns is found in rounded stones and boulders typical of the shore, soil for building mounds is available inland. But there seem to be no mounds at all of the period in the area of concern.

Even if this regional picture is most striking there is also general tendency in many traditional societies, as Gabriel Cooney expresses it,¹¹⁰ to see "the contact zone between the sea and the land ... as a liminal zone, resource-rich but also appropriate for the disposal of the dead." Other authors illuminate the point in prehistoric Scotland and Neolithic Brittany.¹¹¹

The Iron Age mounds, on the other hand, were erected on the very doorstep of the farm, i.e. the grave field was an integrated part of the *inmark*. Nevertheless, the shore was used for individual burials in cairns. My own experience concerns the province Ångermanland of northern Middle Sweden, the very core area investigated in-depth by Evert Baudou.¹¹² These cairns have often been plundered. Since there is a strict rule in ancient times to respect and actively protect graves, even between enemies, I have suggested that this grave robbery indicates that the cairns had lost their liminality, or 'maritimity' as I put it once, when the plunderers dug their holes, desecrating the burial.¹¹³ The land upheaval then lifted them beyond the sacral point.

If this is correct, it would be reasonable to assume that the liminal zone is quite limited, whereas I have proposed elsewhere that it extends all the way up to the point where the cairn is not visible from the sea, or rather the sea is not visible from the cairn. Of course, both ideas are equally speculative. The interpretations of these coastal cairns range basically from territorial markers in an economic landscape to primary or secondary use as sailing marks in a transport landscape. None of the proposed functions would be excluded *a priori* as an additional function to this cosmographic scheme, especially when it comes to the *precise* location along the shores.

The precise location of the border between the liminal and the non-liminal states is thus still enigmatic. But an answer to the question is suggested by the analyses of the Finnish archaeologist Tapani Tuovinen. His material is the cairns of the Åboland archipelago of southwestern Finland. There are two main periods, the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1000 BC, and the Iron Age, in this case approx. 500-1000 AD. Tuovinen's point of departure is the issue as to whether the main view from the cairns is directed towards the sea or inland. There is a tendency for a direction inland during the older period and for a direction towards the sea during the later period. I think that the border between the liminal state and the non-liminal would be in this cognitive orbit, either with the cairn visible from the water or with a possible view of the sea from the cairn.¹¹⁴

If a cognitive borderline is to be drawn, there is little more to refer to than to the senses. An example of a situation where the border to forbidden behaviour was the sighting distance to the sea is what Vestergaard¹¹⁵ retells about the Faroese woman who has recently given birth to a child but not yet been received into the bosom of the church. She then was preferably not even supposed to leave her house, but if she had to, it was possible only if she could still see the church or the sea. Evidently this is also a reminder of the overall dualism, either the land or the sea, since in this juncture the woman was in a liminal state.



Fig. 22 The large stone maze of Blå Jungfrun National Park, Kalmarsund, Sweden. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1978)

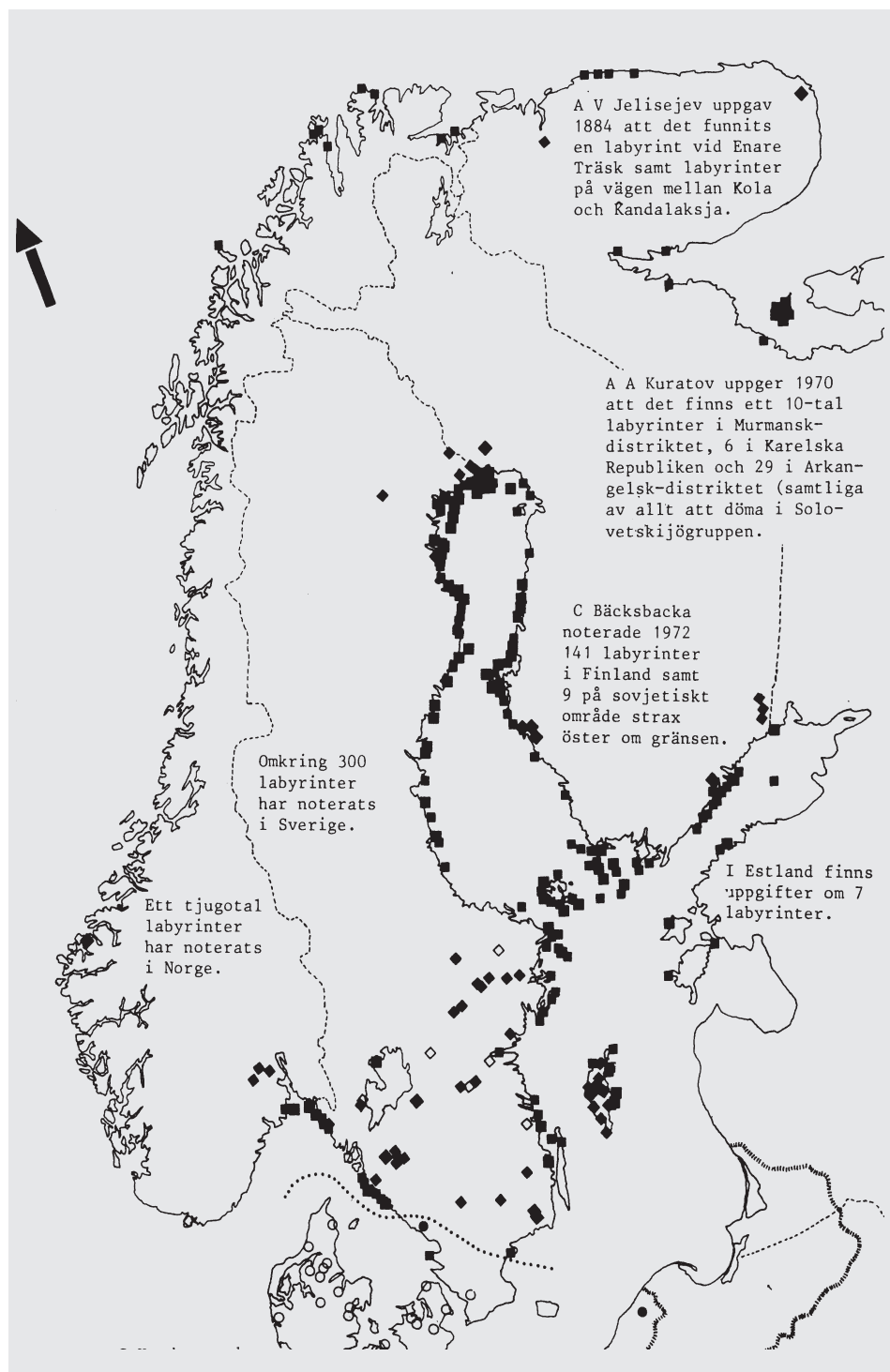


Fig. 23 Map showing distribution of stone mazes/labyrinths in the north. (After Kraft 1982)



Sketch B. Some important ritual points and areas within the maritime cultural landscape of the North.
(Drawing: Christer Westerdahl)

In historical times, starting in the Middle Ages, *labyrinths* or *stone mazes* (fig. 22) were laid out in the same liminal zone, especially along the Baltic coasts of Sweden and Finland, but also in other archipelagos, although more sporadically. There are at least three hundred along the Swedish coasts and more than two hundred along the Finnish. They appear in smaller numbers in Norway, Estonia and Russia (map, fig. 23). Some are accompanied by *compass cards* made of stones, but compass cards could also be carved into the rock, sometimes along with other mari-

time graffiti, reflecting the visits of sailors. Perhaps the liminal zone is not applied consciously in all cases, but there seems to be a natural disposition in maritime culture to leave traces in this zone. After all, little else has remained, e.g. of constructions. The alleged main period of such monuments, the sixteenth century AD (the dating based on lichenometry and rock weathering), is that of the earliest traditions fixed on paper and the first recorded magic functions of place names on the coasts. The significance to maritime people of such ritual behaviour has presumably been many-layered. John Kraft has characterized the function of the stone labyrinths as a *universal medium of magic*.¹¹⁶ I think this is basically correct, not only for mazes but for all kinds of magic spaces or magic charms.

The liminal state along any waterline

The border between any body of water, including rivers, and the “earth” is loaded with magical meaning (sketch B, fig. 24). It is here that wisdom can be procured, and where supernatural duels are settled in Celtic (Irish) cosmology.¹¹⁷ At sea it is called *flomålet* in Norwegian, with reference precisely to the tidal area at the seaboard (with very little tide, however), the area where corpses of anonymous outsiders or dangerous evil-doers were buried so they would not walk the earth inland. Ghosts cannot cross water anyway, according to tradition¹¹⁸, and drowned sailors are therefore buried on islands as a special precaution. The burial grounds in consecrated graveyards of the archipelagos comprise several ritual dimensions, not only the official, Christian one.¹¹⁹

As can easily be imagined, the liminal state is found also in wetlands, again situated between water and land.¹²⁰ One of the obvious cases is the ships or boats or parts of such – to some extent

Stone Age

Mesolithic/Neolithic: ritual, magic, supernatural = rock carvings
Neolithic (LN) = sacrificial deposits, rock carvings, (rock paintings),
early graves in ship form

Bronze Age

Burial = coastal cairns/mounds, ship settings (including islands
and heights)
Ritual = rock carvings, sacrificial deposits

Iron Age

Burial (ritual processions, ships and boats) = ship graves/coastal
cairns
EIA sacrificial deposits, human and war offerings, ship parts
LIA burial deposits, ship settings, sacrificial, ships, ship parts

Middle Age

Supernatural = mazes, burials of aliens (islands, tidal area)

Fig. 24 Different transcendent spheres in connection with water and sea applied in different periods (chiefly prehistoric) of northern Europe.

raw material – found in bogs and marshes. The water vessels are strong on land, as we have indicated, but their elements probably become even stronger when they lie immersed for whatever polysemic purpose intended – for a grave, for universal intentions of magic, or for actual use in a planned construction according to the “wet” wooden technology practised by the Scandinavians. Function is indeed parallel to symbol.¹²¹

An obvious case of liminal significance would be human constructions for ritual purposes, on the sides of lakes or in bogs and marshes, such as pile dwellings of a less everyday type, if this can be established. A Neolithic structure at *Alvastra*, Östergötland, Sweden appears to have been just such a large, seasonally used construction.¹²²

Pit dwellings, crannogs on islands in lakes and other sites at the water’s edges may as well have had something to do with similar beliefs on the properties of a liminal state. The perspectives of wetland archaeology are opening up somewhat in this direction.¹²³

On the other hand some studies indicate that fresh water and salty sea water appear to have different cosmological and other properties.¹²⁴ However, I doubt that this meaning could be generalized. At least it is obvious that e.g. the folklore of great lakes, in particular that of Lake Vänern, the fourth largest of Europe, display the characteristics of that of the Seven Seas, in this case even before being connected by a canal and sluices in 1800.¹²⁵

The liminal state is also found in several other maritime (and other) dimensions. As an example, colours are implied. Black is the colour of the land and is therefore taboo on a boat. The prohibition on wearing the black clothes of clerics on boats may be secondary to the assumed nature of the priests as the counter-magicians of the land. White is of course to some extent permitted at sea. But the only truly liminal, and accordingly “safe,” colour is grey, the colour between black and white. This is the reason for naming magically charged islands *Holmen Grå*, ‘the Gray Island,’ and similar names with the element *grå*, ‘grey.’¹²⁶ In the case of *Holmen Grå* and *Landet Gode*, mentioned above in connection with *Jomfruland*, the special character of their name is clearly indicated by the inverted position of the adjective.¹²⁷

The sun – the foremost liminal agent?

I can imagine a few raised eyebrows at this question. But why not? The kind of cosmology that I am proposing here serves at times as a reinforcement or parallel to religious representations.

Symbols are always ambiguous. Rock carvings and other prehistoric pictures have been interpreted in almost all possible – and impossible – ways. The sun and its orbit across the sky are a self-evident prerequisite for beliefs not only during the Bronze Age. The Danish archaeologist Flemming Kaul has used the evidence of archaeological objects to illuminate the role of the sun’s carrier, the ship of the bronzes and of the rock carvings.¹²⁸ This indeed has a liminal aspect. At the edge of any ocean or any large body of water, the sun could be observed to rise out of and sink into it. To a considerable extent, this explains its connection with a ship. *Along with its permanent carrier, the ship, and its draught-horse – and in an earlier prehistoric inland version, the elk*¹²⁹ – *the sun could be considered a supreme liminal agent.* I must repeat that I consider any identification of rock art scenes with mythical figures to be futile – even if they are more or less contemporary. But a cosmological view must definitely include the implications of the eternal change from day to night, and night to day.

This does not exclude the possibility that memories of some original liminal agent may have influenced the shape and form of actual myths. More specifically, I am referring to what the religious historians and anthropologists call the *trickster* figures. An example would be *Loki* in Scandinavian mythology.¹³⁰ When challenged by the gods, he could easily perform a *hamnskifte*, turn into to an eagle or – perhaps more relevant in this case – a salmon. Another ambiguous and

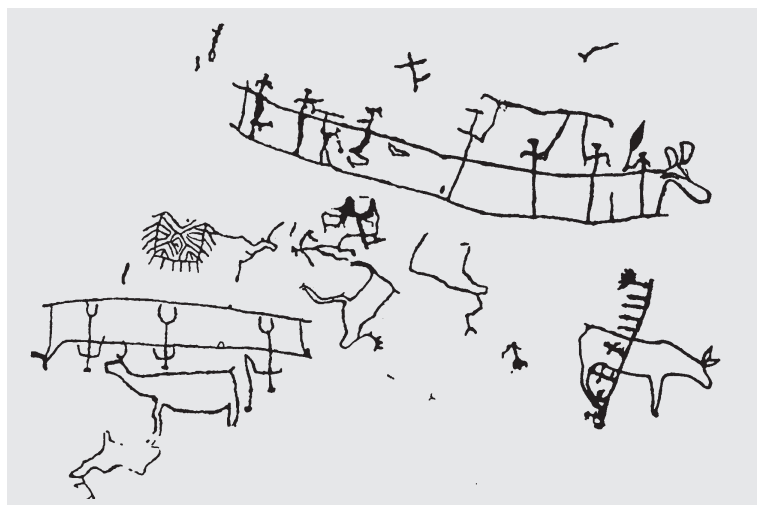


Fig. 25 Part of the rock carving field Ole Pedersen XI, Jiebmaluokta, Alta, Finnmark, Norway. (After Lindqvist 1994)

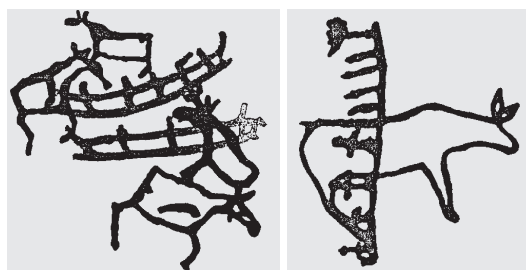


Fig. 26 Superimpositions of ship and elk, Nämforsen, Ångermanland, Sweden (left), Ole Pedersen XI, Jiebmaluokta, Alta, Finnmark, Norway (right). (After Lindqvist 1994)

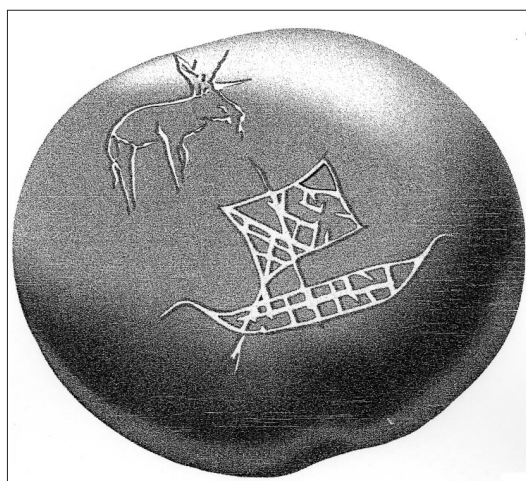


Fig. 27 Drawing of the small (coin-size) Karlby stone, Djursland, with both figures – ship and elk – placed on the same side of the stone, contrary to reality. (Thanks to Hans Drake, Stockholm)

enigmatic figure of some interest in connection with the sun is *Heimdall*.¹³¹ On the other hand, most divinities have the same qualities according to the myths.

However, another reflection could be added on the role of the sun. It is not often depicted very clearly among the rock carvings. The so-called *sun-wheels* or *sun-crosses* appear as its symbol. They are fairly common among rock-carved figures. However the comparatively modest number of actual “sun-like” symbols is somewhat puzzling. Of course it might also be identified with something else on the rock panels. There is another sign, the simple *cup mark*, which is by far the most ordinary of all carvings, not only on the figurative panels. A cup mark is a small, rounded hollow, cut into the rock, almost exclusively horizontal or nearly so. The number of cup marks exceeds by far that of the most common figurative sign, the ship. Normally there are a large number of them in all sites, sometimes without any other figures. Such a simple, round sign – if it really is a sign? – could represent anything.¹³² This is the reason that it is not even considered figurative. I suggest that it might represent the sun, but in a reduced meaning. In some contexts, such as on the shaman drums,

such elementary dots could serve as a *reinforcement of a certain meaning*. On a Saami drum, several dots above the head of a wolf indicate its extreme wickedness.¹³³ Cup marks could have this function on the panels. When seen isolated, they are neutral. Their role is determined by the context. Generally speaking, they are capable of indicating both negative and positive reinforcements. By positive factors I mean, for example, strength, power and good luck. This is one of the alleged functions of liminal agents. They are dangerous, but appear to be used precisely as reinforcements, positive or negative, in all possible contexts.

Active transitions?

Many superimpositions of carvings are found, not least in the arctic hunting tradition. Quite a number concern elks and ships (figs 25, 26). Even if the time span between the figures could be considerable, a related meaning to this reinforcement can still be implied. However, the time difference cannot always be established. There are also sliding transitions within the same figure, for example from bird to ship.¹³⁴ There appears to be a clear liminal meaning in this transition.

Furthermore there is a general lack of cup marks in the north. However, this is only of secondary interest in this hypothesis. Since the time span between the first instances of the arctic tradition and the majority of the southern carvings is staggering, there is no way to make a sensible comparison. However, the need for signs of reinforcement, or perhaps rather a *grading of the magical power of figures* may be general. If this is the case, I would by all means suggest that the superimpositions of the arctic rock art fill the possible function of the cup marks in the south, i.e. during the Bronze Age. In this case, two figurative signs – in my view the strongest liminal agents – have been combined. Presumably their strength was once considered to be at least double that of each potent individual figure, since – in the case of the ship and the elk – they cover both elements, land and sea. Superimpositions are also found in the Bronze Age south but they do not, I think, represent such clear-cut tendencies as in the arctic tradition with only a very few figures involved. I therefore suggest that cup marks perhaps bear the same significance as the superimpositions in the Bronze Age “dialect” of the rock art “language.”

There are a few “windows” to environmental magic from the Iron Age. The old cosmology presumably underlies parts of rituals of the more or less everyday kind. Constellations of two liminal agents do not only occur during the great age of rock carvings. The picture of a sailing ship on a very small, coin-like, perfectly round, almost *gemma*-like stone from *Karlby* (fig. 27) on the peninsula of Djursland, Jutland, is attributed to the Early Viking Age, approximately the period 750-850 AD. It adorned the cover of *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* in 1992. Until now, the ship is the only figure on the stone which has attracted attention, mainly because it might possibly show the first sailing ship of Scandinavia. The form of the hull indicates a type close to the Nydam ship, ca. 350 AD.¹³⁵ On the other hand, the shape of the sail and the weathervane seem to indicate a concurrency with the ship of the Swedish Sparlösa runestone of ca. 800 AD, despite the hull form.¹³⁶ The context of the Karlby stone, both internal and external, has hitherto been largely ignored. But it is quite interesting and relevant to this text. On the back side – if it is that – there is a large deer with antlers or an elk, in any case one of the most prominent land animals. The location of the find is no less significant. The stone was found directly on the beach, in a liminal state if you like. The background can perhaps be considered that of a charm offered for magical purposes.

A similar interpretation can be proposed in the context of another find made in the river *Weser* upstream from Bremerhaven in northern Germany. On several bones, cattle bones mostly, but in at least one case the bones of a horse, obviously thrown into the river intentionally, were pictures of a very accurately carved Roman ship, human figures and some land animals. At first

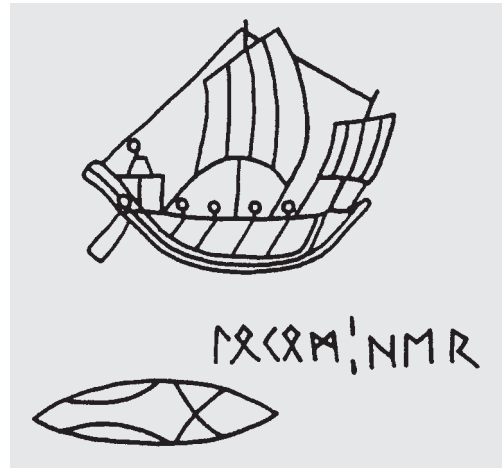


Fig. 28 One of the runic bones of the Weser. a) All sides according to Pieper 1989; b) The ship and the runes exposed.

these figures were thought to be recent fakes. But a genuine runic inscription and a fourteenth-century dating of the bones confirm the Migration Age, fifth century AD. The runic inscription, made in the old 24-letter runic alphabet, is particularly interesting. It says *lokom here*, 'we coax [them, the Romans] here' (fig. 28). Without a doubt, this indicates another magical offering. I have proposed that it expresses a form of Germanic "cargo-cult" towards the Romans.¹³⁷ The liminal meaning would then be inferred by way of the bones of land animals, the offering at the shore and the figurative motives.

The last case is the *Häggeby* picture stone of Uppland. It is not a charm like the others, but the basic layout is the same. One side depicts a rowing ship with its crew (fig. 29). It is to some extent unique on the mainland and therefore slightly anomalous, but fundamentally it appears as an occurrence of the "Gotlandic" kind, possibly fifth or sixth century AD. There is no runic inscription. The dating is mainly based on the fact that the ship lacks a sail, and to some extent on stylistic features. It may be a sepulchral monument, but not necessarily. The other side exhibits two horse figures with human attendants on both sides, obviously instigating a stallion fight (fig. 30). I find it natural, however, to introduce a parallel interpretation approximately of the same significance as the others. Images of two liminal agents must have been a strong means of invocation even, as is reasonable to assume, in a sepulchral context.

Why?

A cosmological explanation of the ancient world according to these chief conjectures appears to me quite logical and quite reasonable. The starting point was the distinct contrast between the sea with its waves on the one hand, and the coastal rocks, steep cliffs and mighty inland forests on the other. To some extent the emphasis has been on the world under water, invisible to men, but precisely therefore filled with unknown dangers, but also good fortune, and along with it sometimes immense – but capricious – catches. The force of the meeting between sea and land, the water surface, is expressed by an intermittently enormous surf, incessantly fascinating. Knut Helskog discusses the concrete human perception of the shore area, concentrating on the saline Atlantic:



Fig. 29 The ship on the Håggeby picture stone, Uppland, Sweden, approx. Middle Iron Age. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1972)



Fig. 30 Back side of the Håggeby picture stone, showing two horse figures. (Photo: Christer Westerdahl, 1972)

"The shore is where land meets water. It is a zone that stretches from the dry land immediately above the high-tide mark and into the ocean at the lowest tide mark. It is the area that is the last to be covered by snow when winter returns. In the spring, the shore is the first area where the snow disappears and where life associated with land first reappears. As such the shore (associated with any body of water) connects not only land and water but also the life therein."¹³⁸

Basically, the impression of a transitional zone is similar on the Baltic or the shore of any body of fresh water, except that the situation is somewhat reversed. In the brackish area, the shore and parts inland are the last to be covered by ice and snow due to the fact that the higher temperature of the sea is usually higher in the autumn, and in the springtime the ice and snow stay there longer than inland or out at sea.

If we add the dramatic effects of a crushing swell or the huge spray clouds of a storm, along with the enormous strength of the waves at the shore, it is even easier to apply the omni-human experience and fascination with the shore as a dividing line, and consequently, to associate it with liminal qualities.

The sun is seen coming out of or entering this ambivalent element every day and night, depending on whether the coast faces east or west. Man's experience of this landscape creates the cognitive landscape within man. It is not uncommon to observe the elk swimming, the whale stranded on the shore, or the seal on land, sometimes far inland. The adaptation of human beings to the maritime landscape is the prerequisite for a world built on such opposites or contrasts. The first point in time at which a cognitive world of this could have developed, I believe, is the Mesolithic. I suspect that it presupposes more advanced boats than simple log boats. But the related structure of human thought is certainly more elementary than that. It reminds me of the concepts of *thesis*, *antithesis* and *synthesis* developed by the German philosopher Hegel.¹³⁹

In a way, the *noa* name or the liminal agent is the counterpart of a conceptual *synthesis*. To some extent, the well-known but arguable socioanthropological concept of *dual organisation* may be a social reflection of this conceptual structure.¹⁴⁰ If the cosmology under discussion here was founded in cognition in hunting, fishing and gathering cultures, as I assume, the twin worlds would reappear in the Neolithic as a fundamental antagonism between what would be considered as wild, savage, feral and what is tame, domesticated. Not only *The Domestication of Europe* – the title of the brilliant attempt by Ian Hodder¹⁴¹ to bring symbolic order into that world – but also the mere fact of a fundamental shift in values and cognition during the Neolithic, deserves our credence. As I have pointed out elsewhere, it is a pity that Hodder focuses on aspects he refers by the invented Proto-Indo-European concepts *domos*, *foris*, *agrius*, but has no space for a sea, a *maris*. Even in his object of study, the land mass of Central Europe, the sea and

the waters would have been a point of reference. The liminal meaning of the fresh waters is convincingly demonstrated by huge quantities of bog offerings, starting in the Mesolithic but reaching a peak in the Neolithic and carried on without any interruption into the Bronze Age, however with variations of sites and of artefact composition which are in themselves of great social and cosmological interest.¹⁴²

Generally speaking, the meaning of rituals in the liminal state, the liminal zone, with liminal agents in either element, sea or land, would be apotropaic, protective or beneficial in some way. In each case the precise function is irrevocably lost. However, the context of burial or other basic ritual provides some indication of the seriousness attached to it the minds of the people of the past.

Summary: The time factor

To maintain that one and the same cognitive structure may have been at the basis of a cosmology for eight to nine thousand years sounds little convincing. But the very father of the ecological school in the history of religions, Åke Hultrantz, confirms the probability of that circumstance:

"The opposition between sea and land within fishing and hunting culture undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of taboos in fishing. It is here the question of more than just categorization into a dichotomy between land and sea, motivated by the structural "order." It is a question of a deeply felt division between two worlds within surrounding reality.

The ancient fishing culture – ancient in structure and general patterns, not in details modified over time – has survived up to our own times in marginal zones, where it has existed since antiquity. Isolated but populous fishing settlements have best withstood modernizations following in the steps of agriculture, high culture and industrialization. In particular the fishing villages of the sea have preserved their continuity."¹⁴³

What Hultrantz is treating here is the origin of recent fishing taboos, but the wider implications of this complex are my own. Furthermore, it should of course be repeated that this structure is proposed as a *cosmological dichotomy*, not a religion. As well as the inescapable fact that symbols are always *polysemic*!

According to my exploration of possible interpretative models for prehistoric societies, both the location and the contents as well as the building patterns of ancient monuments and finds such as rock carvings, burials and sacrifices reflect the opposition of sea and land and the qualities of the liminal zone. This zone is at the border between the two elements, either in the water or on dry land. Islands are of course particularly loaded space, bounded and surrounded as they are by this zone. Islands of the dead existed in many places in prehistory.¹⁴⁴ The mechanism of liminal agency can be applied both ways, terrestrial things at sea, maritime things on land. The liminal state appears to be served also by any kind of ritual immersion into water, even stagnant, such as that of lakes, bogs and marshes.

Within maritime as well as terrestrial archaeology, the relevant remains have been found and will continue to be found on land, in wetlands, on the shore and at the bottom of the sea. Most of them express practises of ancient magic, rite and cult. Only with the fairly recent scientific exploration of the abysses of the sea have both their ambiguity and the bottomless human fear and awe of them been reduced to more reasonable proportions. But the fascination of mind and cognition of what is happening at the shore and in the water is still there and will always be there.

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Notes:

- 1 Ström 1950.
- 2 Ström op. cit.
- 3 Lévi-Strauss 1967a, Tilley 1990.
- 4 Westerdahl 1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2004, 2005, in prep.
- 5 A current discussion on the term *taboo* is found in Hultkrantz 1992a. *Taboo* is taken from Tonga, *noa* from the Maori of New Zealand.
- 6 The most comprehensive treatment is Norwegian, Solheim 1940, although this author included almost all the Nordic orbit, including Estonia (he had Oskar Loores' work from 1931 translated). Another fundamental work is also Norwegian, Hovda 1941a.
- 7 Edlund, A.-C. 1992: 63.
- 8 Jakobsen 1921, Säve 1940, Lockwood 1955, Fenton 1969.
- 9 The inverted adjective is one case in point, Weise 1969, but I have personally recorded others.
- 10 Just as Henningsen points out concerning the ceremonies of sailor's baptism: "The reason why there is no mention of baptism in Europe (before the end of the sixteenth century) lies simply in the nature of the sparse material extant on the subject. Seamen were not very communicative about the custom; there might even have been a sort of taboo about it ..." (Henningsen 1961: 201).
- 11 Much later systematized in Westerdahl 2003b.
- 12 Westerdahl 1987b, 1989.
- 13 Solheim 1940: 14. Transl. by this author.
- 14 Mullen 1978, Firth 1971 (1946) very briefly, Frazer 1955 fragmentarily, some references in Edlund, L.-E. (ed.) 1992. – In Europe, excluding the Nordic orbit (with the Atlantic islands), similar taboos are found e.g. in Sébillot 1886, Stammer 1962, Hole 1967.
- 15 Westerdahl 1986.
- 16 Solheim 1940: 165. Transl. by this author.
- 17 Westerdahl 1992: 6.
- 18 Jasinski 1993a & b.
- 19 Westerdahl 2002b.
- 20 Clark 1982: 160, as an "animus towards things rural and agricultural."
- 21 Poggie & Gersung 1972, Poggie et al. 1976.
- 22 But what about the strong taboos of the horse? The latter definitely belongs to the male, cultural sphere. This anomaly cannot just be explained by local factors, nor to the widespread prejudice pertaining to the slaughter of horses and the eating of horse meat (Egardt 1962).
- 23 A good economic discussion on the early cultures of this kind is found in Fitzhugh 1975, with a circumpolar bias, and Yesner 1980. Cf. Cunliffe 2001.
- 24 E.g. Schurtz 1893, Wundt 1910.
- 25 The kind of outsider woman, e.g. the outcast single mothers, as depicted by Frykman 1982 (1977).
- 26 Zeilich-Jensen 1974: 47ff.
- 27 Olaus Magnus: Historia 2:23, 3:1. The combination of the island of the sailor's baptism, the tabooed status of its name, its role as the central meeting place of witches and its great maze/labyrinth, is unique. Cf. Modéer 1927.
- 28 On *Helgö* names: Calissendorff 1965. The Nordic *heilagr*, 'hallowed, holy, sacred,' but also 'forbidden,' possibly even 'taboo' in some sense, at least understood legally, outside of normal jurisdiction (see Westerdahl 2003), apparently has the same ambivalent meanings as Latin *sacer* and Hebrew *qadosh*. See also Steiner 1967 (1956).
- 29 Hovda 1941b.
- 30 Claussøn Friis 1881: 297. The rule is that as long as you are approaching a certain "charged" place you use the *noa* name. If you do not, you will meet contrary winds. When withdrawing from the place it is less important.
- 31 There are several other such maritime localities in the north, e.g. *Lyderhorn* at Bergen, Norway, *Hornelen* in Nordfjord, Norway, appearing as *Hornilla Buk* on the Carta marina of Olaus Magnus AD 1539, *Brattön* (alt. Blåkollen) in Bohuslän, where the very top is still called Blåkollen, just like Blåkulla as Blå Jungfrun, Sweden and (*Stora*) *Bratten* of lake Vänern in Sweden. However, it seems that Blå Jungfrun is a particularly well-known locality for this phenomenon.
- 32 Westerdahl 2006a in prep. The legend of St. Sunniva Storm 1880: 145ff (Acta Sanctorum in Selio). The European - background of the legend is given by Young 1933. For the Mediterranean, slightly interesting notes on the role of women for sailors are found in Pitt-Rivers 1970. Even in later Lutheran times, the Virgin Mary was thought of in the north as the chief protector and benefactor of the fishermen, the sea being her *storehouse* (Scotland), *visthusbod* (Swed.) and *stabbur* (Norw.; Solheim 1940: 117), with identical meaning. The liminal meaning of females would be paralleled by the strong – and universal – tendency to think of the boat as a female and giving it female names.
- 33 Ljunggren 1941.
- 34 A similar statement has been retold elsewhere, but at this junction I fail to remember the source.
- 35 Cf. Fries 1998 for the distribution of some of the sites.
- 36 Westerdahl 2004; cf. Henningsen 1961.

- 37 There is not to be found references to grazing of horses or other animals, nor any similarity in form. Among the *Hesten* names there are some that do not connote the normal skerries, but quite conspicuous mountainous features at the classical passages exposed to the fury of the North Atlantic, like *Stemshesten* at Hustadvika, Møre and Romsdal, Norway. This has been a well-known sighting point from time immemorial. It was remarked in a poem of the Saga of St. Olav (The Saga of St. Olav: 172; Norges Kongesagaer 1979 II, p. 64.), that the Danish king Canute the Great in AD 1028 sailed past Stem in the Hustad area, i.e. Stemshesten, on his journey to Nidaros (Trondheim). There was in fact in Hustad a farmstead called Stem. It is presently unknown where king Øystein died in AD 1123 (The saga of the sons of Magnus Barfot, Magnussønnes saga: 23 II. Norges Kongesagaer 1079 II, p. 254). *Hesten* is the alternative name of Stålet of Stad, at the border in the north of Sogn and Fjordane, Norway. At the entrance of Sognefjord there is a well-known and important sighting point on the mountain *Lihesten*. As an example of a small skerry at a significant point *Hesten* outside Selja, the island landing place of St. Sunniva can be mentioned. This locality is found immediately south of Stad.
- 38 Hovda 1941a.
- 39 *Dýr* could mean a deer but also a four-footed animal in general.
- 40 Særheim 2005: 40.
- 41 Van Gennep 1960.
- 42 Olaus Magnus 1555: 2:23, 3:1, Hermelin 1930, Westerdahl 2002b (Vänern). Interviews by this author.
- 43 Cf. Sandström 2003 with other references, esp. Edlund 1989, etc., and Fernholm 1943.
- 44 According to an estimate by the author, based on Ohlmarks 1946 and Müller-Wille 1970, 1974, there must be at least six hundred boat graves at ca. three hundred locations places in the north, the majority in Norway. They date from at least a fairly early part of the Roman Iron Age, ca. 100 AD, to the end of the heathen period, probably late tenth century AD.
- 45 According to other estimates, including Capelle 1986, there are at least 1,500 ship settings in Sweden and ca. 500 outside this country. They date from the Early Bronze Age (although ship-formed stone graves do occur even in the Neolithic) to the Viking Age, and no period so far can be given precedence because of sparse datings. And so far actual datings seem to indicate a preponderance in the Bronze Age of the south (old Denmark) and on Gotland.
- 46 Cf. Crumlin-Pedersen/Munch Thye (eds.) 1995.
- 47 It should be observed that, according to the scheme proposed here, the shore where the ship must be launched is an ambivalent, hence liminal, area. Here anything could happen. In this case a launching may be obstructed by way of magic, usually by a woman. Such legends and tales have been treated by Westerdahl 2001. The obvious reflection in Nordic mythology is in the story of the burial of Baldr. The ship with his corpse could not be launched until the arrival of an old witch named Hyrrokin, who carried out her task with such glee that the ship caught fire. This witch was the trickster Loki in disguise.
- 48 Müller-Wille 1970, 1974, 1995 on grave boats, Capelle 1986, 1995 on ship settings, with an interesting precursor in Ohlmarks 1946. A possible universal sepulchral meaning of the boat as a scandal is indicated by Ballard (et al.) 2003 in an interesting comparison of recent Southeast Asia with prehistoric Scandinavia.
- 49 Skaarup 1995 on the transition between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic.
- 50 Bakhtin 1968, Ladurie 1979, Leach 1961, Turner 1969.
- 51 E.g. Henningsen 1950. Several other surveys exist, although without any fundamental additions.
- 52 Ellmers 1995.
- 53 Oma 2000, Opedal 2005.
- 54 Especially Swedish archaeologists stressed this aspect in the past, and it was revived recently by Bradley (2000: 132ff.).
- 55 Helskog 1985.
- 56 Partly due to the fact that rocks only exist in present-day Denmark on the island of Bornholm, but the same ships are common on bronzes, Kaul 1998.
- 57 The percentage varies – sometimes drastically – between different panels in the same area, but the author has managed to cull the following from standard works: Denmark 25%, Uppland, Sweden, 57%, Östergötland, Sweden, 59%, Bohuslän, Sweden 57%, Østfold, Norway 69%, Rogaland, Norway 80%, but Trøndelag, Norway seems to deviate, probably ca. 20% (preliminary oral communication Kalle Sognnes, NTNU, Trondheim).
- 58 Ohlmarks 1963.
- 59 To make my point perhaps I should call this fellow *Bonden*, ‘The Farmer’?
- 60 Westerdahl 2006b in prep.
- 61 Almgren 1926-27.
- 62 Glob 1962, 1969.
- 63 Henningsen 1950 on votive ships, 1953, on boat pageants/carnevals, and sailor’s baptism 1960, 1961.
- 64 Kaul 1998, 2004.
- 65 Cf. Østmo 1998.
- 66 Found e.g. in Johnstone 1980, Cunliffe 2001: 66.
- 67 Cf. on sealing taboos also Edlund 1989, 1992, 2000.
- 68 Westerdahl 1999.
- 69 Peel 1999.

- 70 The latest treatment is Peel op. cit.
- 71 Westerdahl/Artzy 2002.
- 72 Grima 2001.
- 73 *The Odyssey*: 251-252, as translated by Butcher/Lang 1909: 269ff. The critical point is how the words *βοός κέρασ ἀργαλίοιο* are interpreted: Cf. Homer, *Odyssee*, Darmstadt 1986. Differently translated but not necessarily more correct: *The Odyssey* transl. Rieu 1969, p. 60. The horn is not a practical sinker for the hooks!
- 74 Wachsmuth 1967, Brody 1998, Vella 2002, and in prep., cf. Morton 2001.
- 75 Here note 10; Henningsen 1961: 201.
- 76 McGhee 1977.
- 77 Zeilich-Jensen 1974: 80ff.
- 78 Interviews *in situ* made by the author in 1981 and 1986. On the extensive use of seal blubber in the Bothnian area, cf. Larsson 2000.
- 79 Hood 1992.
- 80 Lundberg 1997.
- 81 Alsaker 1987, giving the technical information.
- 82 As suggested by Larsson, et al. 1997, cf. Sarauw-Alin 1923: 194ff. On a (votive) deposit of axes at the same time in Norway, Østmo 1995.
- 83 Liddell, H.G. & Scott, R. Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford 1901 (1843).
- 84 In fact, at which point the liminal state becomes what we would call 'holy,' or 'hallowed' is open to conjecture, in the same way that *taboo* is. The double meanings of 'holy' and 'forbidden' (and, somewhat contradictorily, to some extent even dirty) adhere not only to the concept of *taboo*, but also Latin *sacer*, Hebrew *qadosh* and Nordic *heilagr* (Steiner 1967 (1956), Calisendorff 1965, Hultkrantz 1992a).
- 85 The dog was indispensable in locating points on land in fog; aside from their practical value, both animals were so important to the ship as an entity that, according to medieval English law (first Statute of Westminster, 1275) no shipwreck was legally abandoned until both had left it (Thomas 1984: 98).
- 86 Cf. generally in Crumlin-Pedersen/Munch Thye (eds.) 1995; on ship settings Ohlmarks 1946, Capelle 1995, Artelius 1996, on pageants Henningsen 1950, 1953.
- 87 The elk could possibly be another (land) animal, a bear? Pers. comm. Knut Helskog, Tromsø. Helskog 1988.
- 88 Pers. comm. Richard Bradley. Another rockcarving in Kvernvik, Nord-Trøndelag, Norway, depicts only halibuts formed together as a crescent.
- 89 Kulturhistoriskt Lexikon för Nordisk Medeltid (KLNLM): "*Flundrefiskar*" (J. Bernström).
- 90 Svanberg 2000: 120.
- 91 Solheim 1940: 41ff., Lockwood 1955: 7 and note 2, p. 9.
- 92 It could also be seen as the transcendent entering everyday life. Mircea Eliade states in the preface to an important book on the holy and the profane (Eliade 1969) that to religious man (normal) space shows breaks and cracks. This is where the transcendent or holy forces come forth.
- 93 Bjerck 1993.
- 94 Toivanen 1995.
- 95 As *magicae artes* mentioned by Bartholomeus Anglicus in *De proprietate rerum*; cf. de Anna 1992: 18.
- 96 Olaus Magnus: *Historia* 2:3, 23, 3: 4,12, 14-21, 22, etc.
- 97 Henningsen 1966: 117.
- 98 Part of the crew on Swedish men-of-war of the seventeenth century were Finns and Saamis. Many Finns served as well in the army and the cavalry. The Swedes were rumoured in Europe to use these alleged sorcerers to win battles in the Thirty Years' War. This is one of the reasons that the Chancellor of the Realm, Magnus Gabriel de la Gardie, imported the famous Strassburg historian Johannes Schefferus (Johann Scheffer) to write an objective work on the Saamis. This appeared first in Latin, as *Laponia* (1673), but was rapidly translated into all the major European languages at the time.
- 99 A powerful refutation of this die-hard prejudice was the exhibition *Sea Finland* of the National Maritime Museum of Finland at its namesake in Greenwich; on Saami boats Westerdahl 1987a or *Deutsches Schifffahrtsarchiv*: Teil I: DSA 18, 1995: 233-261; Teil II: DSA 19, 1996: 317-349; Teil III: DSA 21, 1998: 233-254; Teil IV: DSA 22, 1999: 285-314.
- 100 Högnäs 1995. Swedish-speaking Finns were thought to be maritime, inhabiting the coasts, and the Finnish-speaking Finns were thought to be the people of the forests.
- 101 Mulk 1998, Bayliss-Smith/Mulk 1998.
- 102 Westerdahl 2005.
- 103 Manker 1938-50.
- 104 Turner 1969, Helms 1985, 1998.
- 105 Cunliffe 2001: 9ff.
- 106 Sognnes 1994, Helskog 1999.
- 107 Lindqvist 1994.
- 108 Bradley 2000: 141, his fig. 43.
- 109 The total number is unknown, but along the coasts of Finland, Sweden and Norway it must exceed twenty

- thousand. In southern Sweden and in Denmark/northern Germany they are substituted to some extent by shore-based mounds.
- 110 Cooney 203: 326.
 - 111 Pollard 1996, Scarre 2002a, b.
 - 112 Bronze Age, cf. Baudou 1968; Iron Age Baudou 1989, Westerdahl 1985: 86ff.
 - 113 Westerdahl 1999.
 - 114 Tuovinen 2002.
 - 115 Vestergård 1981: 83.
 - 116 Kraft 1982. A basically functionalist view of coastal mazes, with some datings, cf. Westerdahl 1996a.
 - 117 Rees & Rees 1973.
 - 118 Haavio 1947.
 - 119 Westerdahl, in prep.
 - 120 Shetelig/Johannessen 1929 still contains the best published catalogue. An unpublished survey has been carried out by the present author. But the most extensive recent work has been accomplished by Morten Sylvester, Viten-skapsmuseet, Trondheim, Norway. On valuables offered in such places, cf. Hedeager 2003.
 - 121 This "aphorism" was indeed expressed in Westerdahl 1995. Some relevant aspects on watery symbolisms were expressed in the thematic issue of *Current Swedish Archaeology*, Vol. 11, 2003, e.g. by Lotta Fernstål, Åsa Fredell and Susanne Thedéen.
 - 122 Malmer 1991, based on Browall 1986.
 - 123 Van de Noort/Sullivan 2006: 69ff., passim.
 - 124 Tvedt 2006.
 - 125 Westerdahl 2002b, 2003a.
 - 126 I have myself recorded three cases of small and dangerous skerries called *Grå Häst*, 'Gray Horse,' in Lake Vänern (Westerdahl 2003b: 65).
 - 127 Weise 1969.
 - 128 Kaul 1998, 2004.
 - 129 Okladnikov 1972.
 - 130 Rooth, A.B. 1961. The folklorist Rooth believes that Loki is among other things a personification of the spider. This spidery part of her treatment is, however, doubtful.
 - 131 Ohlmarks 1937.
 - 132 Innselset 1995 has documented the use of such cup marks into recent times, and this could be corroborated by the present author, in fact by way of his own grandmother, but reference is then made not to panels with figurative carvings but to isolated occurrences of only cup marks, sometimes in large numbers.
 - 133 Manker 1938-50.
 - 134 Sognnes 1996.
 - 135 Rieck/Crumlin-Pedersen 1988.
 - 136 Westerdahl 1996.
 - 137 Ellmers 1987, Pieper 1989, Westerdahl 2002b. On twentieth-century cargo cults Worsley 1970 (1957).
 - 138 Helskog 1999: 76.
 - 139 Hegel 1807.
 - 140 Lévi-Strauss 1967b, Westerdahl 2005.
 - 141 Hodder 1990.
 - 142 Bradley 1998, 2000, Koch 1998, 1999, Larsson 2001, Van de Noort/O'Sullivan 2006.
 - 143 Hultkrantz 1992a: 42; transl. by the present author.
 - 144 As an example, a reference to a possible case is found in Lindqvist/Possnert 1999.

Kosmologie des Meeres und Meeresarchäologie

Zusammenfassung

Die Aufgabe der Meeresarchäologie besteht in der Dokumentation und Analyse vergangener maritimer Kulturen. Früher wurde der Begriff maritime Kultur definiert als kulturelle Manifestationen, geprägt von Gruppen, die am Meer und vom Meer sowie im weiteren Sinne auch an größeren Gewässern leben; Unterschiede zwischen dem Meer und großen Seen dürften aller Wahrscheinlichkeit schwer auszumachen sein. Archäologie war und ist im Wesentlichen eine Wissenschaft der materiellen Kultur. Die moderne Forschung sollte ernsthaft darum bemüht sein, auch die kognitive Welt der Vergangenheit zu rekonstruieren, das also, was Menschen über sich und ihre Umwelt dachten, wenn auch möglicherweise gewissermaßen unbewusst. Eines der am weitesten verbreiteten und offenkundigsten Merkmale wäre die Kosmologie der Meere, wenn man sie als solche bezeichnen will, die von heutigen Religionen deutlich zu unterscheiden ist.

Obwohl diese Studie viele Bezüge zu strukturalistischen Mustern und zum Geschlechtergegensatz enthält, zielt sie doch vor allem darauf, disziplinübergreifende Analogien, vor allem ethnologische und sozialanthropologische Quellen und Analysen heranzuziehen. Ein zentraler Begriff ist dabei der des Schwellenzustands (*liminality*), der nicht nur in der Soziologie, sondern auch im ökologischen Kontext verwendet wird.

Zwei anthropologische Hauptkonzepte neuerer Kulturen aus dem südpazifischen Raum sind Tabu und Noa. Tabu ist, was verboten ist. Noa ist das Gewöhnliche, das gegebenenfalls auch an die Stelle dessen treten kann, was tabu ist. Noa kann auch eine Konstruktion für die Absicht sein, eine Paraphrase oder ein Euphemismus. In diesem Fall entspricht das für das Meer gültige Tabu dem, was das Land verkörpert. An seine Stelle tritt Noa, das auf dem Meer nicht verboten ist.

In Nordeuropa gibt es überaus reichhaltiges Material zu Tabu und Noa bei Fischern. Das meiste Quellenmaterial stammt von hier, aber es scheint Übereinstimmungen zu anderen Teilen der Welt zu geben. Das bekannteste Merkmal mag das Tabu von Frauen an Bord eines Schiffes sein. Dasselbe gilt in der Regel aber für alles, was mit dem Haushalt an Land zu tun hat, für Klauentiere, bestimmte Vögel, den Priester (Geistlichen) usw. Es erscheint als schlüssiges Glaubenssystem, das hier wie dort auf der gefährlichen Dichotomie oder dem Gegensatz zwischen Land und Meer gründet.

Anstelle der tabuisierten oder einer anderen Bezeichnung, einer Paraphrase oder eines Euphemismus wurde die Noa-Bezeichnung verwendet. Als dieses System zur Gänze entwickelt war, galt es als eigene Sprache auf See, wie das von Faröer bekannte *sjómali*, hauptsächlich aber als andersartiges Vokabular wie die *hafwords* oder *luckywords* in Shetland, in Gotland *skrocknamn* genannt. Letzteres bedeutet »Bezeichnungen des Aberglaubens«, was den abschätzigen äußeren Beobachter verrät. Tatsächlich handelte es sich jedoch nicht nur um ein anderes Vokabular; die Einflüsse zeigten sich unter Umständen auch in Grammatik und Syntax.

Einige der für die Fischer gültigen Verbote gingen auf die Seemänner über, was sich durch die elementare Bedeutung des Fischfangs für maritime Kulturen erklärt. Tabuisierte Orte mit allseits bekannten Noa-Bezeichnungen stimmen mit solchen überein, an denen Seemannstauen abgehalten wurden.

Zusammenfassend kann man sagen, dass sich aus dem Gegensatz zwischen Land und Meer dementsprechend zwei Grundsätze ableiten lassen: 1. Sämtliche an Land gebräuchlichen Begriffe, Bezeichnungen oder Muster sind auf See prinzipiell verboten (auch wenn sie sich auf die See beziehen). 2. Die hervorstechendsten Landmerkmale, wie etwa Tiere usw., sind mit den stärksten Tabus belegt; von ihnen geht die größte Gefahr aus. Es gibt allerdings ein drittes Prinzip,

wonach diese Tabus – gerade auch die größten – durchaus gebrochen werden konnten, die Gefahr damit gebändigt und durch magische Übertragung der Dinge vom Land auf die See und umgekehrt zum Vorteil gewendet wurde, was weiter unten mit dem Begriff der Schwellenkraft (*liminal agency*) umschrieben ist. Dabei wurde jede Art von Medium miteinbezogen, Sprache, bildliche Darstellungen oder die Sinne wie Gesichts- und Hörsinn.

Wenn diese Dichotomie von See versus Land Bestandteil der prähistorischen Kosmologie war, ist es nahe liegend, dass die Grenze zwischen den beiden Elementen durch Grabmäler markiert war. Eindeutig belegt ist das durch Felsritzungen vorwiegend in Küstennähe, vom ausgehenden Mesolithikum über die Bronze- bis hin zur beginnenden Eisenzeit. In der Bronze- und teils noch in der Eisenzeit waren über die Küste verteilt etliche Stein- und auch Erdhügel aufgetürmt. Die Verbundenheit mit der Küste im Begräbnisritual wird noch deutlicher, wenn höher gelegene Orte, Vorsprünge oder andere augenfällige Merkmale einbezogen waren, sogar bis hinein in den Mittelmeerraum. Weitere Kategorien wie die steinernen Küstenlabyrinthe aus historischer Zeit kann man als Ausdruck einer universellen Magie unter Fischern betrachten. All das verweist auf die Küste als Schwellengebiet (*liminal zone*).

Aufgrund des Noa-Prinzips kann man mit hoher Wahrscheinlichkeit davon ausgehen, dass Symbole, Metaphern oder Inkarnationen des zum Land gehörigen Teils der Dichotomie auf See zwar tabuisiert waren, mittels einer bewusst herbeigeführten, zielgerichteten Handlung aber deutlich verstärkt und durchaus unberechenbar und gefährvoll, aber unter Umständen auch auf See nutzbringend werden konnten. Inkarnationen dieser Art waren die Herrscher über die Natur, an Land etwa der wilde Elch, der Bär und das domestizierte Pferd, auf dem Meer Wale und Robben. Kamen letztere an Land, was in der Realität beobachtet werden konnte, galt das als günstig, ihr Erscheinen auf Felsen offenbar ebenfalls. Wichtigstes Tiermotiv für Felsritzungen in der Jagd-, Sammel- und Fischfangtradition der Nordpolargegend sind Elche, während in südlichen Ausgestaltungen bäuerlicher Kultur aus der Bronzezeit am häufigsten Schiffe auftauchen. Es kann daher als wahrscheinlich gelten, dass das Schiff mit dem Meer gleichgesetzt und an Land als nutzbringend erachtet wurde.

Die magische Funktion von Schiffen in Gestalt steinerner Begräbnisstätten in Schiffsform, vom späten Neolithikum bis in die ausgehende Eisenzeit, und bei Boots- und Schiffsbestattungen ist offenbar auf den Schwellenzustand zwischen Land und Meer zurückzuführen. Eine Schwellenkraft (*liminal agency*) lässt sich ferner dadurch belegen, dass Schiffe aus der Nordpolargegend als Stevenfiguren Elchköpfe führten, während an Schiffen aus südlichen Gegenden entsprechend den an Land meist verehrten Tieren Pferdeköpfe angebracht waren. Die Sonne schließlich, die in der Vorstellung auf einem Schiff aus dem Ozean hinaus oder in ihn hinein getragen wurde, galt möglicherweise als vornehmste Schwellenkraft und besaß in einem bestimmten Kontext göttlichen Status.

Andere Muster, die für Rituale, Opfer und Bestattungstraditionen (fremder oder anonymer Personen) überliefert sind, verweisen allem Anschein nach auf einen Schwellenzustand (*liminal state*) in der Begegnung von Land und Wasser, insbesondere im Binnenland. Die liminale Funktion von Seen, Sümpfen und Mooren für manche Perioden ist augenfällig.

Manche Völker und Ethnien schließlich, die man irrtümlich ausschließlich für Binnenbewohner hielt und mit dem Land identifizierte, Finnen und Samen, wurden in Europa wegen ihres »liminalen Status« möglicherweise als Hexenmeister auf See betrachtet.

Riten in liminalem Zustand, auf liminalem Gebiet und mit liminalem Agens, ob auf dem Wasser oder an Land, waren im Großen und Ganzen als apotropäische Handlungen mit schützender oder heilbringender Funktion gedacht; welcher genau, lässt sich nicht mehr in Erfahrung bringen. Im Kontext von Bestattungen ergeben sich jedoch Hinweise auf bedeutsame kognitive Intentionen.

Diese Kosmologie der zwei Welten könnte zum einen auf die zeitlose Faszination des Menschen für das Schauspiel zurückgehen, das sich ihm an der Küste bietet, zum anderen möglicherweise auf die Gefahren und Unwägbarkeiten der Natur ganz allgemein. Die in der Wahrnehmung generell liminale Rolle von Wasser tritt jedoch ebenfalls zu Tage. Als möglicher Archetyp seien auch das dualistische menschliche Denken und zweigeteilte Organisationsformen in manchen Gesellschaften als Parallele zur verbreiteten strukturalistischen Ausbildung kultureller Muster genannt.

Cosmologie et archéologie maritimes

Résumé

La tâche de l'archéologie marine est la documentation et l'analyse de cultures maritimes anciennes. Autrefois, le terme de culture maritime était défini comme des manifestations culturelles formées et pratiquées par des groupes qui non seulement vivaient près de la mer, mais en vivaient et également, au sens plus large, vivant au bord de plus grandes étendues d'eau; selon toute probabilité, il sera difficile d'établir des différences entre mer et grands lacs. L'archéologie était et reste essentiellement une science de la culture matérielle. La recherche moderne devrait sérieusement s'efforcer de reconstruire également le monde cognitif du passé, ce que l'homme pensait de lui-même et de son environnement, même si c'était de façon probablement inconsciente. L'une des caractéristiques les plus répandues et les plus visibles serait la cosmologie des mers, si elle existe en tant que telle, qui est à différencier clairement des religions actuelles.

Bien que cette étude comprenne de nombreux rapports avec les modèles structuralistes et l'opposition des sexes, elle vise avant tout à utiliser des analogies interdisciplinaires, en particulier des sources et analyses ethnologiques et socio-anthropologiques. À ce propos, un terme central est celui de liminalité (*liminality*) qui a été employé non seulement en sociologie mais aussi dans un contexte environnemental.

Deux concepts anthropologiques essentiels, repris de cultures plus récentes du Pacifique Sud, sont ceux de *tabou* et *noa*. Tabou, c'est ce qui est interdit. Noa, c'est ce qui est ordinaire et qui peut, si nécessaire, remplacer aussi ce qui est tabou. Noa pourrait aussi être une construction pour l'intention, une paraphrase ou un euphémisme. Dans ce cas, ce qui est tabou en mer, c'est ce qui représente la terre. Noa le remplace, puisqu'il n'a pas été interdit en mer.

Il existe un matériel excessivement riche sur tabou et noa parmi les pêcheurs de l'Europe septentrionale. La majeure partie du matériel des sources est concentrée dans cette région, mais il semblerait que des parallèles existent avec d'autres régions du monde. Le tabou le plus connu est certainement le tabou entourant la présence féminine à bord. La même chose est généralement valable aussi pour tout ce qui concerne la tenue du foyer à terre, les animaux portant des griffes, certains oiseaux, le prêtre (ecclésiastique), etc. Il apparaît comme un système cohérent de croyances, dont la base commune est la dichotomie dangereuse ou l'opposition entre mer et terre.

Au lieu d'utiliser le terme tabou ou un autre nom, une paraphrase ou un euphémisme, on employait le terme noa.

Lorsque ce système fut développé dans son entier, il aboutit à ce qui était supposé être un langage particulier en mer, un *sjómali*, tel qu'il est connu aux îles Faroe, ou principalement un autre vocabulaire comme les *hafwords* ou *luckywords* aux Shetland, ou encore *skrocknamn* à Gotland. Ce dernier signifie «*noms de la superstition*», ce qui révèle un spectateur externe con-

descendant. Mais il ne s'agissait pas uniquement d'un autre vocabulaire, même la grammaire et la syntaxe étaient susceptibles d'être influencées.

Certains interdits des pêcheurs sont passés chez les marins, la pêche jouant un rôle élémentaire dans la culture maritime. Les lieux tabous, avec des noms *noa* connus de tous, semblent être les mêmes que ceux où avaient lieu des baptêmes de marins.

En résumé, l'opposition entre terre et mer se laisse appliquer de deux façons: 1) tous mots/noms ou modèles usuels à terre sont généralement interdits en mer (même s'ils se rapportent à la mer), 2) les incarnations les plus évidentes de la terre, comme par ex. des animaux, sont celles dont émanent le plus de tabous et de dangers. Toutefois, un troisième principe veut que ces tabous – justement ceux qui sont les plus grands – puissent être transgressés, le danger étant ainsi écarté et grâce à un transfert magique, les choses de la terre en mer et vice-versa transformées en avantage, ce qui sera plus loin désigné sous le terme d'entremise liminale (*liminal agency*). À cet effet, tout moyen d'expression sera impliqué: langue, représentations picturales, les sens comme la vue ou l'ouïe.

Si cette dichotomie de la mer opposée à la terre était un composant de la cosmologie préhistorique, il y a tout lieu de penser que la frontière entre les deux éléments fut marquée par des monuments funéraires, comme en témoignent clairement les gravures rupestres prépondérantes à proximité des côtes, depuis la fin du mésolithique jusqu'au début de l'âge du fer, en passant par l'âge du bronze. Au cours de l'âge du bronze et encore en partie à l'âge du fer, un grand nombre de cairns ou de tumulus étaient disséminés le long des côtes. La relation avec la côte dans les rites funéraires devient encore plus évidente lorsque des lieux plus élevés, des promontoires ou d'autres caractéristiques du terrain sont pris en compte, même jusque dans la région méditerranéenne. D'autres catégories, comme les anciens labyrinthes côtiers en pierres, pourraient être considérées comme l'expression d'une magie universelle au sein des pêcheurs. Tout ceci contribue à désigner la côte comme une zone liminale.

Bien que les symboles, métaphores ou incarnations de la partie de la dichotomie inhérente à la terre soient tabous en mer, en partant du principe de *noa*, il est fort probable qu'ils pouvaient être rendus extrêmement forts, assurément imprévisibles et menaçants par un acte conscient et intentionnel, s'avérant toutefois bénéfiques en mer. De telles incarnations étaient les maîtres de la nature, comme l'élan sauvage, l'ours et le cheval domestiqué faisant partie de la terre, et les baleines et les phoques de la mer. Lorsque ces derniers apparaissaient sur la terre, ce qui pouvait être observé dans la réalité, c'était un signe considéré comme favorable. Visiblement, leur apparition sur des rochers semblait produire le même effet. Parmi les motifs animaliers des gravures rupestres, les animaux les plus importants dans la tradition arctique de pêche, cueillette et chasse sont les élans, tandis que dans les régions du sud, à tradition plus agricole, ce sont les représentations d'embarcations qui prédominent à l'âge du bronze. Il est donc fort probable que l'embarcation est identifiée à la mer et considérée comme favorable sur terre.

Le rôle magique que joue le bateau sous forme de sépulcre en pierre, de la fin du néolithique à la fin de l'âge de fer, et d'enterrements dans des embarcations, est probablement dérivé du seuil liminal existant entre terre et mer. Une autre confirmation du rôle liminal est révélée par le fait que les bateaux de la tradition arctique portent des têtes d'élans à la proue, tandis que les embarcations de la tradition du sud portent des têtes de chevaux, correspondant aux animaux de terre les plus révéérés. Pour finir, le soleil, qui est porté sur une embarcation dans et hors de l'océan, pourrait être considéré comme la plus puissante force liminale, atteignant dans certains contextes le statut de déité.

D'autres modèles relatés dans des rituels et des sacrifices, des traditions funéraires (de personnes étrangères ou anonymes), semblent révéler un état liminal entre terre et mer, particulièrement dans les terres. Le rôle liminal des lacs, marécages et marais est clair à certaines périodes.

Pour finir, certains peuples et ethnies que l'on considérerait à tort comme étant exclusivement

des habitants terrestres et identifiés au pays, les Finnois et Lapons, ont pu apparaître comme étant des sorciers en mer, en raison de leur statut liminal.

La signification des rites dans l'état liminal, la zone liminale et l'entremise liminale, que ce soit sur mer ou sur terre, était généralement apotropaïque, à fonction protectrice ou bénéfique, mais dont la fonction précise est à jamais perdue. Toutefois, le contexte des funérailles révèle des intentions cognitives importantes.

Cette cosmologie des deux mondes pourrait remonter d'une part à la fascination intemporelle de l'homme pour le spectacle qui s'offre à lui sur la côte, d'autre part probablement aux dangers et à l'imprévisibilité de la nature en général. Néanmoins, le rôle liminal de l'eau dans la perception apparaît également. Il faut citer aussi comme archétypes possibles la pensée humaine dualiste et les formes d'organisations dans certaines sociétés en tant que parallèle aux modèles structurels généraux.